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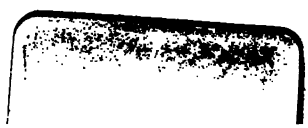

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[See page 52

"I LOVE YOUTH AND ALL THINGS THAT ARE HEALTHY AND STRONG AND BEAUTIFUL"

FELICITY CROFTON

BY

MARGUERITE BRYANT
(*Mrs. Philip Munn*)

AUTHOR OF
"CHRISTOPHER HIBBAULT: ROADMAKER"

NEW YORK
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1916

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TO

CATHERINE

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FELICITY CROFTON

CHAPTER I

"When We Set Out to Make New Friends,
We Truly Set Out on a Great Adventure."

I

It was winter. Not the spurious winters of late years —seasons of rain and mouldy dampness—but a time of snow, frost, and a cold so penetrating that it found a lodging even in the warmest corner of Bath. Christmas itself had been mild enough. It was not till the year was a month old that he bestirred himself to answer the gibes flung at his failing powers by a demonstration that his mantle was still white and his crown still of icicles if so it pleased him.

The hills round the city had snow-clad summits, giving an oddly expanded look to the country. The big grey stone building that headed a combe to the south of the city looked a dirty drab before the virgin whiteness of the wide spaces. At the bottom of the combe there was a little lake spanned by an ornamental bridge, and standing there, looking up the hill, one could see the big building outlined against a faint blue sky. The skirting woods bent their snow-laden branches to the earth, and the mid-day sun, pouring down on it all, bedecked them with a myriad jewels.

The first smooth whiteness of the snowy slope had

been broken by toboggan runners, and a wide track of crumpled snow to the left of the bridge testified to many spills. The track was empty for the moment, though up at the top, under the shadow of the wide steps, two figures were busy with a toboggan.

There was a man on the ornamental bridge below, smoking and well content. He found the keen air pleasant; he liked the sun, he liked the snow, he liked his own idleness, and very much he liked his return to the scene of his first introduction to his own mental powers and to the possibilities of friendship otherwise than that of kinship. Alexander Fraser, who ruled in the big house above him, had proved a good friend in those early lonely days, and later on a wise mentor. No other man had done so much for him. He was the dearest of men to revisit. Bessington reproached himself for the faint shade of discontent which had been his when he had landed again from Cape Town two weeks ago and realised that after all he had no more intimate place to spend the generous vacation he intended to give himself than his lonely and long-deserted chambers in the Temple, or Priest's Park. He had tried the Temple first, not wishing to intrude too quickly on his old master, but after a day or two's idle attempts to make his old rooms habitable once more, he had found them a barren resting place, and had arrived here the previous evening to find himself at home!

It was exasperating to think how little he had appreciated Mr. Fraser in the old days when he had been the practically one guardian of his youth! Some such thoughts were trickling through his mind, but his outward attention was given to the two figures at the top of the combe, who had now arranged their sledge and were at the point of starting.

The little toboggan moved, stuck, and then, with a breathless rush, flew down on its own track, ignoring

those already made for it. With a rush it tore down right to the watcher's feet, saw him, apparently, and, after the manner of toboggans, shied violently and shot its occupants both out into a snow heap with undignified haste; then it swung round and pointed its blunt nose upwards towards its starting place.

Its two late passengers were laughing too helplessly to help themselves, and Bessington hastened to the rescue. He assisted the first to her feet. They were both of the petticoated sex. Both were radiant with delight and enjoyment of their upset. It was not till he had helped the second one out of the snow drift, that he realised that this one at least was quite young and the other—well, he was frankly puzzled!

She was brushing the snow off her dress and laughing with the gaiety of a girl of eighteen. She was slight to thinness and her hair had a pretty wave in it, but the kind, laughing eyes that met his as he looked up from brushing the snow from the second adventurer's dress were not those of a girl.

"Thank you ever so much," she said, with surprising friendliness; "it was all Veronica's fault. She steered so badly!"

Veronica turned to him with a little despairing gesture.

"Isn't that too bad! You were watching. Did I steer badly?"

He was truthfully able to confess that they had come too fast for him to judge. In any case he was too blinded by the beauty of the girl to judge of anything for the moment but that particular fact.

Veronica was lovely, just as the day was lovely, with its white virginity and its sparkling robe backed by the blue sky. He did not put it to himself like that: he merely formulated the thought that here was the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

The elder lady arranged her suede cap. "We'll each

of us try alone," she announced, "and whichever of us comes down without a spill will have the best of the argument. Only you must take your own sledge up, Veronica, unless Mr. Bessington will do it for you."

Bessington, with his mind slightly reeling before her assured use of his name, was only too pleased. He was at grips with the fact that he must at least have heard of this lady before, though the mental image he had formed of "Mrs. Crofton" was so preposterously unlike the reality that he could not without dire confusion dissentangle the label.

She seemed to guess his difficulty. "I know you are Dominic Bessington," she said, "because Alexander told me you were coming last night. I am Mrs. Crofton, his sister, and this is Veronica, my daughter."

Veronica extended her hand in a friendly fashion. "Come along," was her gay command, "if you are really going to be an angel. I hate pulling a toboggan up this hill, and Madre won't do it for me."

He obediently made an angel of himself with a good grace. She climbed the hill beside him, disregarding its steepness and the snow in a way to prove that her dislike for pulling up her toboggan was not due to physical disability. She went on talking with the easy friendliness that went to his head.

"Of course," she was saying when he became poised, "it's not like Switzerland, and I'm out of practice. Madre wouldn't go out there this year because of Uncle Alexander. We have been here three years now, and he has often talked of you, but you have never come before."

Bessington explained he had been abroad.

Most certainly he had known that his old master's sister and niece had come to live in the little house adjoining the college. He had hazy recollections concerning things he had heard of these relations of Mr.

Fraser—vague impressions of a middle-aged woman in black with a keen wit and many theories, and a daughter brought up on the said theories. Such was the mental image which for inexplicable reasons had lodged itself in his brain, and until it could be obliterated he must put up with this feeling of confusion.

"Madre *is* better than I," Veronica confessed; "she never loses her head. Still, it was all your fault. I did not expect to see any one there, and I tried to see who it was."

"I apologise! Had I know,—no, had I known, I should have been there all the same."

She laughed. It was a most delightfully infectious little laugh.

"They will be all out tobogganing presently," she told him, with a glance at the house above, "but Madre won't let me come then. She says I should bother them. She always insists that the boys don't want women-kind always round them. However, I couldn't come later, anyway, as I have a singing lesson."

By now they had reached the top of the slope, and he arranged the little sledge for her and held it while she settled herself on it.

"There's no one but your mother down there now," he reminded her, "so you ought to get down safely. Good luck!"

He started the sledge with a vigorous push, and it shot down with the speed of three express trains rolled into one, guided well till just at the end, when, as far as Bessington could see, for no reason or just cause, it turned right over, landed its occupant in the convenient drift, and turned its supercilious nose upward again, challenging fresh competition.

He ran down towards them and met Mrs. Crofton coming up, dragging the toboggan, of which he relieved her.

"She holds me to the challenge," was her laugh-

ing comment; "if I have a spill it will be bad for authority!"

"What made Miss Crofton capsize?"

"She waved her hands to me. That's so like Veronica; she never keeps her attention quite fixed till the end! How do you think Alexander is looking, Mr. Bessington? You know he has been ill?"

He took surreptitious glances at her as they talked, hazarding mental guesses at her age, to suit both the exigencies of Veronica and the appearance of Veronica's mother, and found it difficult. That older faulty impression, however, was beginning to wear thin. Mrs. Crofton was not middle aged; a decade separated her from her brother, and there was no suggestion of a widow in her dress, which was of brown, with a touch of blue. He remembered now the widowhood dated from at least seventeen years back. Mr. Fraser's sister was likely to be clever, but he might have known it would not be the pedantic cleverness of the mere scholar, but rather the wide intelligence of an open mind.

The fine lines of her face just tended towards angularity, but the angle made for health and strength and there was a glow under her rather tanned skin and a vigour in her step and carriage that overrode by at least ten years the total that Veronica's existence demanded of her. It was only when her eyes met his that he clearly perceived she was a woman and no girl. They were so understanding, so brave, so full of knowledge. He talked to her already as to one he had known for long.

"I came so late last night," he explained, "that I have hardly seen—Mr. Fraser yet."

She caught the faint little hesitation before the name and looked down with a quaint smile.

"Don't you call him Fafner?" she asked innocently, "or is that since your day?"

Bessington laughed.

"No, I believe I was godfather. He took me to hear Wagner one summer and that was the net result."

"It's very appropriate. Now you must start me."

He gave her a send off like Veronica's and watched her slide away in the distance. Veronica at the bottom of the slope was dancing with excitement and unfilial hopes that her mother would land in a heap at her feet. But Mrs. Crofton did no such thing. She adroitly guided the sledge across the track of level land, came to a dignified standstill, rose, and turned to her daughter for approval.

"That's very dull," pronounced Veronica, "and you have had more practice than I have."

"I never got on a toboggan till our winter in Vervey. It's all a matter of keeping one's head. Your cap is all crooked, child! Let's take Mr. Bessington for a walk."

Veronica called out to the latter as he approached with congratulations, "Madre says you are to come for a walk!"

He had not the slightest objection. In the course of the walk Bessington learnt that Mrs. Crofton and her daughter had lived, that is to say, they had possessed a house and were not mere hotel sojourners, in France, Switzerland, Italy and Sweden, and that the three years spent here in Bath were the longest stationary residence that Veronica remembered. Apparently they went from one to another of their homes as occasion or mood called them, returning to England when the wish was with them or business demanded.

"I've sold the little house in Sweden," Mrs. Crofton confessed, with a sigh, "because I had such a good offer for it."

Veronica pouted, "Of all the silly reasons!"

"But you can't live in five or six houses!" protested Bessington.

"Not at once. But five or six houses to suit different moods and weather are convenient, don't you think? I let them when I'm not there. I have always wanted one in Spain, but Veronica is already so lazy that I'm afraid to venture."

Veronica declared she would not be libelled.

"Where Madre really wants to go," she remarked confidentially, "is to the far end of the Black Sea. She believes adventures lurk there in every port, and though she loves adventures she doesn't think I'm old enough for them."

"You certainly are not, and you are a dreadful tie," sighed her mother. "Mr. Bessington, please believe I can talk sense when this child is not by."

"I am not complaining at all, thank you!" he said gravely.

It might be all very silly and pointless, but it made for good fellowship.

Presently Mrs. Crofton surprised him again.

"I am so glad you decided after all to come back to England—Alexander is confident that with your fresh South African connection you will do well. After all you are English, and belong to the English Bar."

Bessington, acutely aware he had no one nearer him than Mr. Fraser to be pleased, was curiously gratified at her interest and knowledge of his affairs, and then wondered why he was not displeased. He did not, as a rule, take the world into his confidence.

"I went out there when I was six," he remarked.

"And came back when you were sixteen. And Alexander met you."

"Yes, my brother had written to him, hoping he would remember my father."

"It was your mother whom he remembered," said Mrs. Crofton softly; "your brother knew that!"

Bessington was silent. Again he was debating why he was not displeased.

"And your brother had, with the best intention, sent you to a perfectly beastly school, and Alexander took you away and brought you here, and here you stayed till you went to Oxford—and then the bar—You see, I know all about you!"

"You at least know how much I owe your brother."

A little shadow fell on her face.

"You don't mind my knowing, do you?" she asked wistfully. "I think the debt is still on his side. He loves all his boys, but they all have people of their own, whereas with you he could pretend you belonged to him."

"He was the best friend a boy or man could have!" He spoke brusquely, even roughly, and she nodded and spoke of other things. Yet, later on, he found he had told her more of himself—told her, for example, much of that odd life of his as a child on the veldt, with an invalid father who had sacrificed all that had made his life worth living to him, clubs, friends, and London, to add a few more years to his unduly shortened span and had spent those few years thus gained, in weary longing for all he had sacrificed. He had spoken of his elder brother, who had managed the farm ably enough, yet hating it as his father had hated it, and who, when the hour of his release had come, was too old to seek new springs of life, though he had seen to it that this younger brother should escape back into the civilisation that was his birthright.

She knew far more than this—knew how, just when he had by happy chance and real ability combined, got his feet on the ladder of success, he had been called back to Africa by the brother, then dying, and

had loyally responded, and how the past two years had been spent out there unravelling a tangle of neglected affairs, to the detriment of his career at the English bar. There had been a possibility of his stopping out there, of even reaping a quick success, but he hated South Africa. It meant to him a land of struggles, failure, disappointment, and it had swallowed up the three lives that were bound to him by blood and affection. In England he had had at least friends. So he had returned, and brought with him a modicum of work that, with luck, might again put success within reach. And she knew also better than he did, how well Alexander Fraser had remembered his mother, and how much of his generous affection he had given to her son. Her interest, indeed, in Dominic Bessington had deep springs.

On their return they passed the north front of the house, and about half a dozen young men were standing on the steps of the big portico. They were mostly bare-headed, and most of them were smoking. They all gave Bessington's companions a quaint little salute as they passed, and Veronica waved her hand to them.

One ran after them—a fair-haired and extremely good-looking boy with a complexion that would have done credit to a girl.

"Madre!" he cried, and she turned back.

"Well, Eve?"

The other two went on. Bessington fancied that Mrs. Crofton looked rather thoughtful when she rejoined them.

"What did he want, Madre?" enquired Veronica, as she swung open the gate leading to their own grounds.

"Mark wants to come to tea, and asked Eve to look out for us."

She seemed aware that Bessington had stopped.

"Come in," she said hospitably. "You and Alexander are dining here to-night, but that's no reason why you shouldn't make acquaintance with the Haven in daylight."

"It used not to be called the Haven."

"I rechristened it. It was called the Dell. It makes a convenient headquarters, because when I am away Alexander looks after it more or less."

"Madre!"

"Well, rather more than less."

They crossed the terraced garden, where in summer roses bloomed in profusion. The snow had been swept from the paved walk right up to the front door of the quaint little timbered house, which Bessington remembered as a ramshackled eyesore to the great mansion beside it. Some clever hand and mind had transformed it into a home and a garden, and the irregular sloping fields that surrounded it into terraced walks, where evidently in summer a prodigious wealth of flowers flourished. The low long windows to the south looked out over the combe to the beautiful grey city lying in her cradle of hills, placid and dream-like, with ever a thin filmy mist over her face.

Veronica, running on ahead, flung open the door and stood waiting on the threshold to drop them an absurd little curtsey of welcome, and Bessington, looking at her, was again aware of strange breathlessness before her extreme loveliness.

The house was quite small. There was a hall beyond the porch which was evidently used as a sitting-room, and a room opening from it which was presumably the drawing-room, but which Veronica alluded to as "Madre's room." The dining-room was beyond the hall, facing west. It was all furnished with extreme simplicity, though there was a gratifying supply of books and easy chairs and a general atmosphere of

friendliness. Bessington was glad they were to dine there that night.

He did not stay long now—only long enough to observe that Mrs. Crofton shared her brother's taste for beauty of rather an austere type, and that Veronica had a preference for subtle harmonies of warm origin. It was not till long afterwards he took in the fact that there was nothing in the house, either as wall decorations or hangings, that was not calculated to be a suitable background for Veronica herself. There was nothing, however, austere about Veronica.

II

Mrs. Crofton turned her back on the tea table and sat gazing into the fire. The curtains were still undrawn, and the fire light, reflected in the little leaded panes, seemed an attempt to warm the grey, ghostly world without. Peace and content and a comforting sense of companionship pervaded the atmosphere, and was added to by the faint scent of the yellow tulips, growing in a bronze bowl by the window.

The other occupant of the room was quite alive to this atmosphere, though he would have been at a loss to define it. He was a tall, dark man—or boy—somewhere between twenty and twenty-five. It would be difficult to place him exactly. His rather handsome face was a little less gloomy than it had been on his entrance fifteen minutes ago, but he still appeared restless and uneasy. Mrs. Crofton turned her kind eyes on him.

"Well, Mark?"

He gathered his long legs together and went down on his knees to replenish a fire that needed no attention.

"I'm afraid it's all up," he said a little huskily. "Fafner can't do with me any longer!"

"Real trouble?"

He nodded, playing absently with the tongs, then suddenly abandoned his pretence, reseated himself, and gave his head an upward shake and met her eyes.

"I went down to Bath last night. I had nothing to do, and I was frightfully bored. I just felt I must do something. I can't see what harm it is. It's not as if I weren't used to looking after myself! Being on my own!"

"Any of them with you?" she asked thoughtfully.

"Madre!" There was a fierce reproach in his voice.

"All right," she returned, half laughing; "don't flare—I know you never drag the others in with you! Well, you got found out and Alexander wasn't pleased?"

Mark laughed ruefully.

'No, he was—not pleased! At least he conveyed that impression. I don't know how much he meant it, but he more than hinted he had enough of me—that I was too old for his flock."

He leant his chin on his hands and gazed moodily into the fire again.

"You see this is my one and only chance. If I don't pass now it's all up. It was a job enough to get here, and I have worked—even he admits that—and if I get sent down—sent away, it's all wasted—the money, and it took all we know to find it!"

"We?"

"My mother," he pushed aside the footstool restlessly. "There's no one else." There was a queer little sulky note of defiance in his voice and he did not look at her.

Mrs. Crofton nodded comprehendingly.

"I see it would be a nuisance for you. Are you quite sure you understood Alexander rightly?"

"One's never quite sure what he means. One's gen-

erally too battered to care by the time he's finished. Do you think he does it all deliberately? It's like being flicked with a whip, and one has just to stand still and take it, and, by Jove, it does cut!"

"No, no," she interrupted hastily, "he doesn't know, half the time! Alexander was always like that. His clever tongue hurts so much more than he knows or reckons. Didn't you tell him what a—nuisance—it would be?"

"Quite clearly, Madre, you've never been told off by Fafner or you wouldn't talk of what one told him! To begin with, there isn't a chance, and secondly, when he's finished, one's so flattened out, one just wants to hide one's head in the sand." Then he added quickly: "It wouldn't hurt half as much if one didn't like him so much!"

"You do like him?"

Mark looked at her and frowned.

"You know we all like him!"

The plural and the noncommittal "like" disguised nothing from her. She, ineed, knew how they all worshipped her brother, despite his sharp tongue and stern discipline.

"He never appeared to mind so much before," went on Mark. "And I am so much older than the rest that I thought it really was not a great sin!"

"You've done it before?"

He nodded.

"How do you go?" she asked with real interest.

"Out of the billiard-room window, over the chapel roof and down."

"Rather a big drop! Back the same way?"

"Yes."

Her eyes rested on his shapely hands, and a scraped knuckle, but she made no comment.

"I suppose Alexander feels it's bad for the others, even if it doesn't hurt you. He does care so fright-

fully about them all, you see. I am sure he'd hate sending you away, and I don't believe he meant it. Still, you must see it won't do. Suppose Jim and Eve and Ingleside took to going down to Bath because they were a little older than the others?"

Mark laughed.

"Ingleside's too fat. He couldn't."

"But seriously, dear boy! In justice to Fafner" —she put her hand on his arm.

He did not move, but kept singularly quiet.

"I see it's a fool's trick," he admitted reluctantly. "I didn't see it at the time. No doubt he's right. I'm a rotter, and no use to any one!"

He laughed in an angry, uncomfortable way.

"Alexander wouldn't endorse that."

"It's what he said," Mark answered hoarsely, "and considering what my being here means to me and to —her, it's pretty true."

"Why didn't you tell him as much!"

"He must know it. He made it plain enough even for my dense head."

"He mightn't have understood that you were really cut up about it."

They both sat silent. Presently Mark got up. His head was very near the ceiling in the low room, and his face was in shadow.

"What's the use of saying it?"

"You might try."

"Face him again?"

"He'll have forgotten what he said."

"But I haven't."

"He ought to know that. Please make him understand how much you care. I don't want to lose you, nor does Eve!"

"Oh, Eve!"

"Well, aren't the two of us together worth some sacrifice to your pride?"

"I'm not proud!" he broke in quickly.

She smiled at him.

"I have at least always believed you to be truthful! Listen! There's a motor. Veronica has taken a taxi back, extravagant little thing! I must send a message by the man though, and order fresh tea. Shut the curtains for me, will you, Mark?"

She was going to the door and he stopped her.

"Madre!"

She turned back and patted his arm caressingly.

"It's all right. I am sure Alexander will be reasonable."

He caught her hand and kissed it awkwardly and with a hot face.

"I'll do it, Madre."

Veronica entered, bringing with her a fresh current of cold air.

"Sitting in the dark, of course! I can't see who it is, but it's obviously Mark, so there'll be no buttered toast left." She switched on a light, and shook her furs. "It's snowing again. Do shut out the horrid dark, Mark!"

Mrs. Crofton went out to send off her message and order more toast, and Mark obediently drew the curtains.

"If you lived over there instead of here you wouldn't be in such a hurry to see them drawn, Veronica."

"You can't see these windows from the college!"

"Can't you?"

"Well, can you?"

"You told me the other day never to contradict you!"

She nodded gravely. "Quite right, only you always remember things at the wrong moment. I had a horrid drive up, so lonely without Madre! Aren't you going to thank me for letting her stay?"

"I am grateful to her for not going out, but I am quite positive you tried to make her go!"

"Of course I did!" Veronica opened her beautiful eyes widely. "Wouldn't you?"

"I don't think it would make much difference what we tried."

"Well, you had your way to-day!"

"It was a question which of us wanted her most."

"That was me," said Veronica swiftly. "It always is—here's tea."

"I must go," he rose regretfully.

"Buttered toast again?" She lifted the cover.

He shook his head. "Not after your insinuations!"

"It's a virtue to like nice food. I share it with you."

"No, I must go. Tell her time was up, Veronica."

She nodded.

"It's dreadfully cold. I'm glad I haven't to turn out again."

"You are a sybarite."

"I'm a sensible being! Good-bye." She looked at him a little questioningly. Something must be wrong or he would not so urgently have desired an interview with her mother. But her curiosity flickered out. It was useless and Veronica never wasted her forces on useless efforts.

Her mother found her still at tea and deep in thought when she entered five minutes later.

"How did the lesson go to-day?" she asked, taking Mark's chair. Veronica had the other—the one that was called Madre's.

"Tip-top! I stood on the tips of my toes and got the top A for once. It sounded all right when I was up there, but I am under the impression the effect down below fell rather flat!"

"You don't practice enough."

"Oh, Madre! Just after a lesson! Let's talk of something really interesting."

"For example?"

"Shall I wear my white dress to-night or the maize?"

"You call that important?"

"Dreadfully."

"Alexander won't notice."

"Mr. Bessington will."

"Vanity!"

"Darlingest Madre, I am only anxious to do you credit!"

Mrs. Crofton laughed.

"You will have to talk to Mr. Bessington for a little while anyhow. I have something to say to your uncle."

Veronica assumed an anxious air.

"Poor Alexander! Is he very naughty?"

"How many times am I to tell you not to call him Alexander?"

"Well, Fafner, then. Uncle is such an ugly word."

"It is respectful," retorted her mother severely.

Veronica stroked her mother's hand.

"It's the white dress, isn't it?"

It was in white she eventually appeared when Mrs. Crofton, her brother, and the visitor were discussing the latest life of Stevenson published that month. Again Veronica found the room in semi-darkness and switched on the light.

The three turned to look at her. She was worth looking at, and though she was quite aware of it, it was the awareness of a child who delights in pretty things with an innocent vanity that has no conceit in it. Her glistening hair, which had a delicious curl in it, was bound to her shapely little head with a black ribbon. Her dazzlingly fair complexion was

her only colour, and the white dress was a mere background to her charms. Bessington was sharply aware again that she was destined to stand out in his mind as linked with snow. Snow, with its elusive softness, its easily spotted purity, its caressing embrace, and its exhilarating coldness. Mr. Fraser's dreamy face quickened with interest as she entered.

"Spoilt angel! We had to walk on your mantle to get here."

"Only on the teeniest fringe of it then. The path was swept this morning." Mrs. Crofton talked to Bessington and once his eyes were withdrawn from Veronica he momentarily forgot her.

One of the assets by which Bessington had climbed so swiftly towards his legal success was his belief in a workable understanding of his fellow-men, joined to an interest in them that amounted almost to a passion. Now Mrs. Crofton's personality somehow baffled this understanding of his. Her vitality, her unfeigned enjoyment in small pleasures and jokes that bordered on the infantile offered such a curious contrast to the sense of confidence and reliability she inspired, that it gripped him as something worth more than usual attention.

The little dinner was a success, as Mrs. Crofton's dinners always were. In ten minutes he had forgotten that sinister charge of cleverness, which still tingled in his ears, for her cleverness consisted in just this, that she made people forget her general ability in recognising their own! After a time, they came full tilt against the subject of education and he listened with amazement to her vehement denunciation of the modern estimate of it. Then she stopped abruptly and he saw Mr. Fraser's eyes twinkling and Veronica's pretty laugh rang out.

"Oh, Madre, that's forbidden!"

Mrs. Crofton apologised plaintively.

"It was all your fault; you began it, Mr. Bessington," declared Veronica saucily.

"I am not repentant. I should like to hear Mrs. Crofton's views."

"No, you wouldn't. We shouldn't have time for anything else," began Veronica.

"Veronica, you are an impertinent little chatterer," interposed her uncle with affected reproof. "I do not like my sister to talk of it and lose her temper," he went on, turning to Bessington, "because she says more than she means."

"That's a family failing," Veronica insisted demurely.

Behind all his interest in these people Bessington was aware from time to time of half a dozen questions that kept ringing their changes on his mind, such as, what had the deceased Mr. Crofton been like? Why had she never married again? What after all was her age? And, more insistent than all, was there ever any one so beautiful as Veronica out of story-book land?

Mrs. Crofton stopped her brother as they moved into the drawing-room.

"Alexander, I want you a minute."

He feigned an air of resignation and sat down in a big chair.

"I am not the only person who says more than they mean on occasions."

She spoke with diffidence and great gentleness.

"I daresay not. I believe I do it myself sometimes. What is the matter, my dear?"

"I was wondering if you meant all you said to Mark to-day."

Alexander frowned ruefully.

"What did I say to him?"

"He's very unhappy."

"So he ought to be!" retorted her brother rather hotly. "Did he tell you his crime?"

"Yes. Of course he should have had the sense to see he can't be allowed to break rules because he is older than the others. It's not the first time either, you have told him off for it, is it?"

"Told him off! Felicity, you are getting a depraved woman."

"Never mind my depravity. Just tell me what you said to Mark the last time about his going down to Bath? Did you point out to him then the moral responsibility he incurred?"

"He's no sense of it! I don't remember what I said."

Mrs. Crofton was silent a moment.

"Do you mean to send him away, Alexander?"

Her brother stared at her.

"Send who away? Mark? Good heavens, Felicity, the boy's got to go up this year! What a preposterous idea!"

"So I thought, but you managed to convey that to him this morning."

Alexander fidgeted uneasily.

"Nonsense, Felicity. Mark was having you on."

"Who's depraved now! No, Alexander, Mark was never further from joking in his life. He really thinks you are tired of him and mean him to go, and he's perfectly sick with his own foolishness."

"He didn't convey that impression to me."

"Oh, my dear, when will you learn that you flatten out people with that clever tongue of yours far too much for them to have a chance of conveying anything? Mark had not considered that he had done anything very heinous till you dropped on him and I don't suppose you did more before than hint it was not advisable for him to go down to Bath at all hours, and did not take the trouble to let him know you were speaking sarcastically. Then without further warning on the very next occasion you turn and rend him,

leaving him with the impression he's no good to you or any one else, and that you can't have him here contaminating your other innocent lambs!"

"I never said a word like it!" protested the accused.

She laughed gently.

"No, that's the worst of it. You conveyed it all without using the actual words; without knowing you were hurting intolerably the more so because Mark—and you know it—adores you!"

"Felicity, do talk sense."

"I am trying to. I am not defending Mark. He was much in the wrong but you ought to remember your own power."

Fraser dropped his face on his hands and sighed.

"Felicity, you are hard on me."

"Not a quarter as hard as you are on them. It may be good for some of them, but I am not sure it is for Mark. He's an odd character."

He sat drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair and presently said slowly:

"I suppose they don't realise how I feel myself involved with in all their doings. It is as if I were myself foolish with their foolishness and wise with their wisdom, proud with their success, glad in their joy! Felicity, it's a magnificent thing to be young!"

Her eyes shone and there was a slight tremulous movement of her hands that meant much more than appeared as she turned to him.

"It's glorious!" was her one remark, but unlike her brother's words her own carried no idea of a glory apart from herself. To her at that moment it *was* glorious to be young!

"Tell me," she went on swiftly, "what are Mark's real chances of passing?"

He looked anxious.

"I am afraid of his languages—nothing else. He ought to go abroad, but it's out of the question, I

know." He sighed and got up, walking up and down. "It's hard lines, Felicity. He's really a good man for the work. He's a worker and he has ambition, and he's set on India, but it's money that's hampering him or the lack of it. He has a chance and a good one, but if he fails it will be that. He ought to go abroad again to get rubbed up. I'd send him myself but—"

He did not finish.

Felicity knew well he had already done as much for Mark Forrester as Mark could or would accept.

"If he had any interest and could get a job out there direct he'd be sure to do well. He's the kind, but he has no influence at all."

"A job under some high official in India?"

"Yes. There are just a few appointments made like that you know."

"Are there? We must see."

Her brother looked at her with kindly curiosity. He knew there were possibilities if she cared to move. He wondered if she would.

"What do you think of Dominic?" he asked.

"I don't wonder at your partiality. I used to be a bit jealous for the boys whom I knew better. Still it's hard to know why he's so delightful."

"It's his amazing interest in one. Real interest, not assumed. He is not wanting to talk about himself when he's politely listening to you. He's genuinely absorbed in what you are saying."

"Or in what he's thinking of you! Well, let's go in to them. Veronica may be boring him."

Mr. Fraser gave her a quick glance. She was not smiling. It would never have occurred to him that Veronica could bore any one—but then he set an exaggerated value on his niece.

Veronica and Bessington had not been bored in the least. They had found their way to the piano. Bess-

ington did not sing, but he could play accompaniments decently, and though Veronica refused to sing seriously they ran through scraps of operas and then lighting on a book of Harrow songs enjoyed those.

Bessington had, indeed, no clear knowledge of what he played or she sang. He had only a mazed sense of a golden net and a golden voice and a new disturbing feeling within himself.

III

Bessington, in his habit of regarding his fellow beings as conundrums of inexhaustible interest, had not limited himself to the study of men. At the same time, his experiences with women had been both limited and non-conclusive, and his understanding had been led astray more than once. Disappointment had, however, added zest to his seeking, and he had in turn been interested, dominated, and fascinated by the excitement of his study, but so far he never had the illuminating experience of "falling in love." Indeed, he had never lost control of that level head of his. Yet if his dealings with women had been thus sane and balanced, not the least point of their sanity was the fact that he himself knew he had never been in love. "I shall cease to be reasonable, or to be able to judge when I am," he told himself. He regarded that as the sure sign by which he would know he was not deceived. And since it was to be no matter of logical sequence, he wasted no time pondering over the possible features of "she who was to come," and meanwhile had found life full of other interests and the world a storehouse of surprising souls.

When he walked home with Mr. Fraser that night through the snowy garden, he was still too enmeshed in the net of unreason to know himself entangled. Mr.

Fraser spoke of his sister and hardly mentioned Veronica. Bessington was quite content to talk about Mrs. Crofton and undeniably interested in her, and he did not in the least want to talk about Veronica, because he would have nothing to say if he had attempted to do so. He did not even want to understand her, but he did most assuredly want to see her again.

Mr. Fraser seemed naïvely anxious for his old pupil's appreciation of Mrs. Crofton, and there was a little touch of eager affection in his voice that was rather a revelation to Bessington.

"My sister is rather a remarkable woman, I think," he began; "she has had the courage to mark out a line for herself and to follow it. I am afraid she rather scandalises some people, but I am bound to say that if getting as much joy as is possible out of life, and giving pleasure and help to others in great measure, constitutes happiness, then Felicity is a successful woman."

Bessington said she looked a happy woman.

"And she really has a steady head on her shoulders," insisted Mr. Fraser as if it were a fact he had had to insist on, in the past. "She can pilot people through the most troublesome waters and earn their gratitude; which is more than that type of pilot usually earns! I confess," he added with a little sigh, "that her methods are not always conventional, but they seem to render people happier in the end. There was one case where she prevented a divorce which every one said should be carried through in the interests of morality."

"What was the result?" asked Bessington curiously.

"The couple are absurdly happy now and he is a reformed character. She does things like that—touches things other people would fear to look at. Then with my boys——" He paused.

They were under the big portico now and stood still a moment to look at the inverted heaven that twinkled away down in the velvety blackness below them.

"People blamed her a great deal," said Mr. Fraser abruptly, "for settling here with Veronica. I own I was not quite happy about it myself at first. But Felicity only said she was not bringing Veronica up to live in a convent but in a world of men and women, and the sooner she learnt her way about it the better, and that if she were to lock her up in prison, she would still fall in love when her hour came, without the advantages of any measure by which to gauge her lover. Sometimes I think it's rather hard on my boys. They do fall in love with her, but Felicity seems to smooth it out all right, and of course Veronica is still only a child."

Bessington agreed. He found nothing else to say on the subject of Veronica.

IV

The next day they all skated on the ornamental water at the bottom of the combe. Alexander's twenty pupils and some of the masters, the visitor and the Croftons.

Mrs. Crofton skated well, as she did everything she undertook, but Veronica skated even better. She sped in and out amongst them, bestowing greetings and smiles with fine impartiality, but even Bessington's keen eyes could detect no sign of favour, nothing but the frank, good comradeship of a happy girl, with a big family of brothers. Her happiness was as exhilarating as the air. He skated with her and remembered nothing of all they talked about, except that they laughed a great deal and her little sallies of wit

had a spontaneity that reminded him of twinkling stars.

Presently he skated with Mrs. Crofton and of their conversation he could remember every word. They were joined later by the fair-haired boy with the girlish complexion. Mrs. Crofton introduced him to Bessington.

"I know Alexander leaves his guests to pick up names as they can," she said. "You two have probably met, but I am sure no one has told you that Eve's name is really Adam Preston. I daresay he has nearly forgotten it himself. He remembers it at the beginning of term for about a week, isn't it, Eve?"

"I forget it as soon as you remember to ask me to tea," retorted Eve, gazing steadily in front of him.

"Since when has it been necessary to send you an invitation?" she asked blandly, and he laughed.

Veronica sped up to them, caught at Eve's arm to stop herself, and spun round him. He steadied her carefully with a tolerant indulgence.

"Eve complains he has not been asked to tea this term," began Mrs. Crofton.

"He must have something on his conscience," retorted Veronica.

"I've not. I've behaved myself with extreme propriety."

"Not all the vacation. No one could do that."

"I did. Ask Mark."

"Oh, Mark's prejudiced!"

"And why Mark?" asked Mrs. Crofton.

"I stayed with him some of the time," Eve tried to speak offhandedly.

"Why didn't he stay with you? You would have had a better time,"—this from Veronica.

"Veronica!"

"I only meant that Mark hasn't any hunting or shooting or——"

"We all know what you meant, child. Don't make matters worse by explaining!" laughed her mother.

Veronica whizzed round on her skates to Bessington.

"Take me away," she cried; "they are all very unkind. They won't let me talk!"

Bessington commiserated her and they skated off.

"Mark must have been very glad to have you," said Mrs. Crofton, as Eve seated himself on the bank beside her and lit a cigarette.

"I was glad. I suppose, Madre, he's sure to pass this summer? His mother and sister will be horribly disappointed if he doesn't."

Mrs. Crofton did not answer at once. She was weighing another question in her mind.

"I should say he was certain. Is his sister like him?"

"Not in the least," returned Eve quickly. "She's fond of books and poetry and art and things like that. I think she has a bad time somehow, and she looks delicate." He paused to examine his cigarette. "She is awfully good looking."

"Younger than Mark?"

"Three years younger, I think. She's been abroad for some time. That's why Mark couldn't come to me. His mother thought he ought to be home with Miss Forrester."

"Yes, naturally," Mrs. Crofton agreed thoughtfully, and then wondered if it were natural.

She heard more about Miss Forrester before Eve left her. Miss Forrester adored Swinburne and Wagner. Eve did not seem very clear whether the last was a "theatre person" or a poet or a musician. She had read a lot of philosophy and had wonderful ideas about things.

"So you did not find much in common?" enquired

Mrs. Crofton, with a demure little downward glance that brought out a likeness of Veronica.

"One doesn't always have to like the same things to get on with people," returned Eve rather vaguely. "She didn't mind about my not knowing about her sort of things."

Now Eve was a good specimen of an outdoor young Englishman with rather rigid ideas of his own on some subjects which he kept to himself as a rule, and he was the only child of extremely wealthy and devoted parents. Also he was Mrs. Crofton's very special protégé and she found herself wishing she had not lived so long in ignorance of the existence of another protégé's sister. Still for the time she abandoned the subject.

"Why haven't you been over to see me, Eve?"

"I don't want to be a nuisance—I was in and out all last term."

"Yes, I like it—you know it."

Her voice was reproachful.

"But suppose they all did it?"

"They don't. You are different."

He looked just a shade embarrassed, then laughed.

"The mater said I shouldn't take advantage of your kindness—I told her that was all rot—still——!"

She looked away. She could never quite suppress a twinge of envy when she thought of Eve's mother.

"Your mother does not know how nice it is to pretend that some one of you all has a right to come in and out as he will."

"I'll come—Madre, there's that beastly exam before me this year!" he groaned.

Mrs. Crofton felt confident he would not have confided his detestation of exams to his mother. She expressed some scorn and amusement at his attitude and told him to come and help her make out a list for Mudie's that night after work.

When Mark arrived at her side a little later Mrs. Crofton found she had something to say to him.

Mark Forrester was older than the run of Mr. Fraser's pupils, who were nearly all candidates for Sandhurst, but Forrester had set his heart on the Indian Civil Service. His slender resources could not run to London and Scoones and it would be by sheer weight of ability if he passed from a local crammer; but Mr. Fraser held high hopes of his success and had spared no pains.

Mark said nothing of their discussion of the previous day. He could talk well and even brilliantly when so inclined, though in a manner which left his hearers singularly unenlightened as to his real opinions of things in general. Mrs. Crofton allowed herself to be amused for a short time and then said:

"How long have you been here, Mark?"

"Eight months and three weeks," he answered promptly.

"And all that time you never told me you had a sister!"

He gave an odd little laugh and replied carelessly:

"She's been abroad for over a year. Her name is Stella and she's three years younger than I am. So now you have made up for lost time."

"Well, I am interested in her."

"What's Eve been saying?"—he frowned a little. "There's nothing very interesting about Stella, all the same. She likes reading and poetry and obtuse subjects."

"We should have tastes in common."

"Oh, not in your way," Mark answered hastily. "She likes things differently. I'm not good at explaining, but she likes rather depressing things just because they are depressing, not——" He came to a stand again.

"Go on; you are advancing."

"I am not. And I'm afraid I don't get on very well with Stella. I should give you a false impression. No doubt it's my fault. We like different sorts of things. Madre, it's all right about Fafner. He doesn't mean me to go."

"I thought you had misunderstood him."

Clearly Mark was not to be drawn on the subject of his sister. She was still dissatisfied and puzzled. Eve was so clearly interested and yet from Mark's description Miss Forrester sounded the last person in the world to attract him. Perhaps, after all, she was worrying herself unnecessarily. Eve was not an inflammable boy.

She watched him, presently, cutting new figures on the ice. He mustn't make a mistake over his future. She felt her whole heart throb with a fierce sense of protective right, that was at once unreasonable and out of order. She had nothing to set against it except her knowledge of life and her lack of knowledge of Mark's women kind. Mark himself was, of course, beyond suspicion.

In the end she took herself severely to task for entertaining unwarrantable suspicions and sandwiched this in, with the fixed intention of taking the first opportunity that presented itself of making friends with Mark's sister.

"It's just as well, perhaps, that I haven't got a son," she confessed to herself a little wistfully. "It requires so much more nerve than a daughter."

V

On the higher ground behind the House was the cricket-field, and in front of a little sheltering wood stood the pavilion, a new wooden erection with a roof thatched with faggots, built the preceding summer.

A stone wall in the rear separated this from some fields and a large cow byre. The cricket patch was a sheet of snowy whiteness, only before the pavilion there was a trampled path, for the sunny verandah was a pleasant loitering place when time hung heavy on hand, even in winter.

Half a dozen young men and Malby, the modern history master, were gathered there. The six were sitting or lounging about the palings, and Malby was now standing in the entrance, now walking rapidly up and down, detailing with dramatic vigour an account of a certain fight in the Italian war of independence.

It was always considered a great and legitimate game to "draw old Malby." His enthusiasm for his subject knew no bounds of place or time, and his fervoured imagination and grasp of detail would seize hold of the smallest thread to concoct living, vivid pictures that had a trick of sticking in the memory of his hearers.

For this purpose the pavilion was for the nonce a fortress held by the Austrians, to which, under a starlight night, the enemy were advancing—creeping silently up under cover of the wall!

"About as far away as the corner over there," stammered Mr. Malby in his quick, hurried little voice, "they divided into two parties, and all in a silence that was as profound as night. Those who were advancing across the open—in the shadow of those trees, as it were—carried straw in bundles and faggots bound with tow and those who continued to creep nearer under the shadow of the wall,—over there"—he wheeled around sharply, extending an explanatory finger—"had only their weapons and their approach was even slower and more silent, than that of the others! In the fort itself,"—he wheeled round, fronted the pavilion—"all was quiet. They

had no reason to suspect the enemy were anywhere in their neighbourhood, thought them, indeed, as wandering fugitives, lost on the mountains yonder. The solitary sentry,"—with a sharp twist towards the snowy expanse before them—"reached the end of his beat, perhaps as far off as the gate there,"—one nervous hand jerked the red tie he wore from its discreet repose and dragged it into a shapeless knot. "Then as he turned, death, swift and sure, leapt on him out of silence and darkness. Figures scudded through the night and the faggots and straw were flung down about a hundred yards from the fortress gates, were fired, were ablaze in two seconds, and the first sound that roused the little garrison was the crackling flames and the dense smoke which hid for a moment the waiting enemy. Only for a moment, then the garrison rushed out and over the burning wood and straw there was a hand-to-hand fight. One man, writing after of it, said the grim, dreadful silence of the men was the worst." He strode up and down again, his fingers still restlessly engaged at the twisted tie, then stopped and took up his song. "All the garrison had rushed out, you understand, for the fire *must* be fought as well as the enemy, and the ragged crew across the flaming barrier had poor chance—but as much as they wanted; for meanwhile the second party—do you remember they divided?—reached the back of the extemporised fortress and a triumphant cry drowned even the fire's roar as they took possession of the now empty building that was the key to their central advance. In an instant every window and door was manned, and the Austrians were caught between the ridge of fire without and the fusillade from within. They all fell, with two exceptions, but that force across the barrier was riddled also by their friend's fire—as they knew must happen—only two escaped of them." He jerked his

head sharply and the excitement dropped from his voice as suddenly as it had sprang there.

"When the morning came they buried friend and foe under the eastern wall, and there's a tablet there now with a bald account of it all."

Something in Malby's clear vision and unexpressed admiration for his subject defeated his jerky utterances and wild gesticulations. He drew their eyes here, there, everywhere, to invisible things that seemed part of the landscape to him, and this in spite of themselves! For it was strictly "de rigeur" to simulate resistance to his imperative demands on their imagination, and to refuse to follow that directing finger and compelling look—as long as they could. Even Adam Preston, who had the reputation of being able to sit with unmoved eyes and unturned head through the most passionate discourse, was caught once to-day by a peremptory command to *see* the figures approaching in the dark, along under the wall.

The boy who sat next to him saw it, and had held out his hand silently and Adam with a rueful grin had produced half a sovereign and handed it over. The amount of a standing bet on the event!

"That's how it all was," said Malby, abruptly striving to replace his tie. "They did what they were told to do—I say, you fellows, I hope I didn't bore you with an extra 'out-of-time' lecture?"

"Jolly good one," murmured James Streeter, known to the masters as "that young devil Jim." "If fighting were like that now it would be a good sight better worth while facing exams."

Malby smiled deprecatingly behind his glasses.

"You could have gone away," he suggested a little wistfully.

"But we didn't," said Eve stolidly.

"We remembered 'Manners maketh man,' " put in a third.

Malby was a Wykehamite and was never allowed to forget it on account of his having once quoted that much abused motto to his class.

He still looked troubled, and Eve said:

"It's all right, sir. We all liked it. They are only having you on."

Malby went away, gratified and happy. When he had gone they discussed the affair impartially. They were old enough to appreciate the heroism of it, and young enough to rejoice in the daring of it and to enjoy the illusion he had created.

"What a lark it would be," said Jim, to whom inaction was ever repugnant, "to divide forces and make Old Malby sit up by showing him how much better the attack might have been warded off."

"Or to do it just as it was," suggested another, "fire, faggots and all, from the yard down there. I bet you anything you like we'll smoke you out in double quick time."

"There's O'Brian," said Eve; "let's hear what he has to say."

O'Brian was another irrepressible whose attempt to scale the fastness of Sandhurst had met with poor encouragement from the authorities. He sat down and listened to what they had to say.

VI

"Unless my memory plays me false or times have sadly changed," said Bessington, three days later to Mrs. Crofton, "there's something up to-night. The unparalleled good behaviour in hall could mean nothing else than—fun!"

"I was afraid you were going to say mischief!"

"I'm only six years or so behind it all," he laughed.

"Sometimes a year's enough! Did the fun ever do you any harm?"

"Most instructive school in the world!"

"That's what I think, and am always telling Alexander. In the main, he agrees—but says the parents don't. They are often very stupid. It's a good thing they don't know all—the fun! What is this, specially?"

"Madre's simply longing to take part in it!" declared Veronica gravely. "Do tell her at once that she can't, Mr. Bessington."

"I think it's something up at the pavilion, but I'm not sure."

"Mark's coming in presently, perhaps he'll know."

Mrs. Crofton went to the window and looked out. The weather was on the change. A wind had sprung up and had blown the snow from the trees and was tossing the bare branches fitfully. Overhead the stars shone through the trailing, torn clouds. There was something restless and uncomfortable in the air. The green gate at the end of the garden walk was flung open and Mark's tall figure came striding up the path towards the little gleam of light. Mrs. Crofton dropped the curtains and went to the door.

A qualm of jealousy crossed Forrester's mind as he saw Bessington ensconced in the particular chair that was his. However, Bessington was talking to Veronica to-night and not to Mrs. Crofton, which was comforting.

"Mr. Bessington tells me there is something going on to-night, Mark. Aren't you in it?"

He shook his head.

"Is it likely I'll be in anything after last Tuesday? It's Malby's fault anyhow. He's inspired them to act some scene in Italian history. At least I saw Eve with King's history in his hands and it's not likely to have been there for any more legitimate purpose. Some little fortress business, where they burnt out the Austrians?"

"Surely, they aren't going to act it realistically?"

"O'Brian and Jim are in it," he returned ambiguously.

Mrs. Crofton sprang up.

"Let's all go out and see what they are doing!" she cried.

"It's a beastly night—" began Mark.

But there was no gainsaying her. Her quick mind had seen possibilities. She wanted to be there. Bessington himself felt infected by her interest, but thought it right to back Mark's remark about the night.

"We can get into suitable clothes in three minutes," she declared. "Come along, Veronica."

Veronica demurred a little at the trouble, though she had no intention of being left out of any fun that was going. In less than ten minutes the two reappeared in short skirts and thick coats and the four of them went out. At the back of the Haven a wood protected it from the north and through this a path wound steeply up to the playing fields, coming out nearly opposite the pavilion. It was an eery, wild night and the scene that met their eyes as they emerged from the dark wood was weird enough for its setting. There on the far side of the snowy waste stood the pavilion, and before it burned a flaring hedge of fire, across which sundry forms appeared locked in a deadly struggle. The wind was blowing the smoke right into the pavilion, the holders of which seemed all engaged in desperate efforts to extinguish the blazing faggots with the help of snow and sticks, but, aided by the puffs of smoke which from moment to moment obliged the defendants to rush back for air, the attacking party were continually able to fling more fuel on the fire. Here and there a hand-to-hand struggle was in process and the oddest thing about it was that the mischief workers maintained an amazing silence. It had been decreed that a cry

or even a word spoken aloud should render the utterer a prisoner.

"Oh, what mad children they are!" murmured Mrs. Crofton, partly laughing, partly gleeful and wholly ready to enter into the spirit of the game and play "Jessie Mario" at need to their young Italy.

"They'll end in getting burnt," said Veronica serenely, "and it will be all Mr. Malby's fault. He ought to be talked to by Uncle Fafner."

"Don't be so heartless, Veronica," put in Mark; "anyhow they are amusing you."

Suddenly the silence was broken by a wild cheer and the shutters of the pavilion were flung wide open, letting loose a yellow glare of light on the scene. But now the cunning of the defending party was visible, for instead of employing all their forces on the fire fight, they had left a small body of men in ambush and these now rushed on the intruders and though they could not oust them, they delayed their final display of triumph which was the unfurling of a flag—that being the compromise agreed to—to render the affair something more than a foregone conclusion.

The little group of audience drew nearer and nearer. Mark, doing much violence to his own feeling by remaining neutral, and Bessington himself longing to take a hand, but quite awake to a danger to which the others seemed indifferent.

Then that danger took form. A heavier gust of wind than usual swept a tiny bundle of flaming straw up in the air, and dropped it on the roof of the pavilion. No snow had laid on the thatch faggots, which were dry as tinder under influence of sun and wind. The faggots welcomed the fiery bundle, caught it, as it were, to their breast, and though Bessington, seeing it instantly, shouted a warning as he rushed forward, no one heard, and almost immediately the roof burst into flame, the wind fanning this to wild exuberance.

Bessington found himself in command of the excited band. Some were set to shovel snow on the roof, others to drag farther off the smoking faggots before the building. It was soon obvious that there was little chance of saving the pavilion and their efforts must be directed to preventing the fire spreading to the cow-byre on the other side of the near wall which was linked to the pavilion by a line of larch trees, and a wood paling.

The ground became a sea of muddy, trampled snow, charred wood and ashes, and the workers with their blackened faces and dishevelled clothes became more aware of the real destruction they had wrought and less alive to the tremendous fun of it.

Bessington found Mrs. Crofton by his side, pulling aside the debris of the wooden fence which he was tearing down to cut the direct line of communication with the larch trees.

"Where's Veronica," he asked, without stopping his work.

"I sent her to tell Alexander. They won't see the glare from the house, or hear anything in this wind."

He accepted her help quite naturally, and then a wounded combatant came running up for first aid and she muffled a rather badly burnt finger in a clean handkerchief.

"Isn't it a lark?" cried the injured one.

Mrs. Crofton laughed and glanced a little shamefacedly at Bessington. It was quite obvious that she was enjoying the excitement immensely.

The red gold of the flame against the dim snowy world and the moving figures in the still persistent clouds of smoke made a queer picture. It crossed Bessington's mind that not half an hour ago they were seated in quiet security around the drawing-room fire with the fitful ugly night shut out—and that they

would have been there now if it had not been for Mrs. Crofton.

Suddenly through the midst of them a terrified, scared rabbit rushed madly right up into the verandah of the burning building itself, and huddled in a corner ready for the death that pursued! Felicity saw it and cried out in distress and one boy made a dash for the steps. Bessington pulled him back instantly.

"The roof's going!" he shouted. "Keep away!"

As he spoke part of the verandah roof fell in, with a crash, but not the end in which the poor little creature crouched.

Before Bessington saw what she was at, Felicity was up the steps and had seized the rabbit. A bit of burning wood fell on her shoulder as she sprang back amongst them. It was Bessington who dragged her back and roughly crushed out the fire from the smouldering cloth of which she was unaware. She twisted from his hold and ran off to the wood and dropped the still living and unharmed bunny over the wall into safety and darkness.

Bessington walked after her and accosted her hotly:

"I'd send you home if you were one of the boys, Mrs. Crofton. It was an unpardonable thing to do! What business have you to run those risks—with Veronica?"

"I'm sorry," she returned meekly. "Of course it was silly, but, you see, I am not hurt—and really I didn't stop to think."

"Somehow I shouldn't have expected you to lose your head."

Eve dashed up to them.

"Madre, are you hurt? Oh, why on earth did you do it? It was mad!"—but unlike Bessington his tongue told one tale and his eyes another. They one and all greeted her with cheers and acclamations of praise, half derisive, half sincere, and a little reproach-

ful, but Bessington betrayed no sign of relenting. He was angry with her, and she knew it and felt oddly ashamed.

Then she knew she had displeased some one else.

"You here, Felicity?" said Alexander's voice. "Have you a hand in this mischief?"

"I'm here, anyhow," she admitted. "It wasn't meant for mischief, Alexander. It was the wind did that. And it was such fun till the fire began."

Servants and labourers and general helpers had arrived by now, and somewhat late in the day the hand fire engine was dragged up the hill from the house, but nothing could be done. The pavilion was destroyed, several trees burnt and several men injured. Alexander, surveying the scene, did not feel at all inclined to let his sister's definition of fun go unchallenged.

"If you knew anything of such a preposterous piece of work and did not warn me, all I can say is I hope you will be able to make matters right with Streeter's people if he's too badly hurt to go up for his exam this year. He can't spare time to be ill."

"Oh, Alexander! He isn't really hurt, is he?"

"Mark and O'Brian are just carrying him down and I've told them to telephone for a doctor," her brother insisted relentlessly.

"What happened?" She was on thorns to run off after the injured boy, but dared not.

"His sleeve caught fire, pulling off a faggot just as I came up and I daresay half the others are injured more or less. It's what any one but those fools of boys might have foreseen."

Quite unthinkingly Bessington, who was standing on the other side of Mrs. Crofton, straightened himself up in the old familiar manner.

"I'm most guilty, sir," he said sorrowfully, "I foresaw the possibility and didn't stop things."

"You hadn't time," put in Mrs. Crofton.

"I had ever since this morning," he confessed.

Alexander turned to the group of boys, serious and tired enough now.

"You can all go down," he said sharply; "there are enough grown-up people to see to this now. I'll talk to you in the morning."

Adam Preston lingered, looking anxiously at Mrs. Crofton.

"Mrs. Crofton and the rest only came up at the end, sir. They couldn't——"

"Mrs. Crofton can tell me that herself," interrupted Mr. Fraser sharply.

The guilty lady could not resist a little glance at Bessington and a gleam of answering amusement flickered in his eye.

"Thank you, Eve," she said gratefully. "I am completely flattened out myself, so I shall be able to sympathise with you to-morrow. Oh, Alexander, where's Veronica?"

"I sent her home. I suppose you have only just missed her. You had better go too. Bessington, will you see she does go home?"

"I am going first to hear how Jim is," she answered firmly.

"It's all very well," she remarked when they were out of earshot, "but if it had not been for the wind there would have been no fire, and nothing would have happened but the fun—and it *was* fun, whatever Alexander says. Of course he makes one feel in the wrong for the minute, but my own sober senses tell me there is nothing wrong in trying to enact the night attack on Mulio."

"But lack of common sense is wrong. They ought to have waited for a still night and they had the faggots too close. I saw it at once, and—well, it was out of law after all."

"He'll be dreadfully hard on them to-morrow," she said mournfully.

"Not harder than the world will be if they do silly things without Fafner to point out the silliness. I am really most guilty because I thought of the wind, and did not stop them. I just recollected how sick I should have been myself if an outsider had interfered."

"You are a betwixt and between," she declared, laughing; "and so am I. So I shall tell Alexander to have us both up together; he can't say more than he means to say."

Bessington laughed. "Are you sure? Unless he has changed a good deal I don't think it would make much difference."

VII

Alexander's relentless prognostication happily did not prove entirely true. Jim Streeter was laid up for some weeks with his injured arm and for that time there was quite a definite fear his future career might be endangered, but in the end he recovered. Nevertheless, during those first anxious days every perpetrator in the "outrageous proceeding," as Alexander persisted in calling it, felt himself in disgrace. The only person on whom Alexander did not apparently drop tooth and nail was Bessington, to whom he merely said pleasantly:

"Please don't think I am blaming you, Bessington. A visitor, of course, is excused. Besides, I couldn't reasonably expect you to share my feelings now for my good name, as I might my present pupils."

At which remark, Bessington drew a long breath, apologised profoundly, and told Mrs. Crofton that Fafner had not yet learnt the art of hitting gently.

Poor Malby's consternation was deep and lasting.

He could hardly bear to meet the army his dramatic lecture had called into being; but they one and all scoffed at his attitude and told him with kindly meant but brutal instinct, that it was only because they had not understood his story they wanted to test the possibility of it.

But the most lasting effect of the event was the sealing of a definite friendship between Bessington and Mrs. Crofton. He never apologised for his hot words to her, and she undoubtedly liked him the better for it. Whether it was the sharing of the illegal excitement, or the sharing of the high displeasure of Alexander, or a combination of both, but Bessington certainly found that Mrs. Crofton and he had a new estimate of each other, and that when he should leave Bath he would be the possessor of something he had never wholly possessed before—a woman's friendship.

As for Veronica, she pretended only to laugh at her mother's disgrace with Fafner. "Madre's always doing things like that," she said comfortably. "Uncle Fafner will forget it in a week."

VIII

Alexander Fraser adored his sister, but it was quite true, as he confessed to Bessington one night, that at times she tried him sorely.

"My sister is the oddest mixture," he began diffidently, again conveying a faint suspicion of accustomed apology for her. "Her excessive sympathy with youth and its careless ways leads her into all sorts of scrapes and dangers."

"You mean about the rabbit," put in Bessington, who knew he meant nothing of the kind.

"What rabbit?"

Bessington related the incident.

"She never lacked courage," remarked Mr. Fraser, after a moment's silence.

Bessington looked up quickly.

"Courage? It was not a question of courage with her. It was pure instinct without judgment, and she had no right at all——" He stopped abruptly.

Alexander's rare smile brought out a singular likeness to his sister.

"As you doubtless told her?" he suggested.

"As I told her—or tried to. Mrs. Crofton's life is of more consequence than a rabbit's."

They smoked in silence. Presently Fraser smiled again.

"I had a visitor this morning on behalf of my sister. Veronica called."

Bessington contrived only to look politely interested.

"She said if I was cross to her mother she would not speak to me for a week, and, mark this, Bessington, she threatened to make O'Brian play golf with her three times a week and be late for work every time. She would do it, too!" he sighed.

"Why O'Brian?" Bessington asked the question with an air of detached interest.

"He plays golf well and he has no time to waste over it, or to be late. Veronica knows how to pick her chances. Little imp!"

But his smile was indulgent.

Veronica at least had never tasted the rough side of his sharp tongue.

IX

The snow had gone and left discomfort and mud behind it. Fields and roads were alike unwalkable. The whole countryside looked dirty and half washed, and Mrs. Crofton had to hire a motor to get about,

and declared she would perish of inertia. Veronica frankly enjoyed the motor.

"I shall go abroad," said Mrs. Crofton one dispiriting afternoon when they returned from a pump-room concert. "Let's go to Corsica, Veronica. We have always wanted to and never done it."

Veronica considered the proposition dispassionately a moment, then she leant across to Bessington.

"When are you going away, Mr. Bessington?"

"Tuesday next." He said it with genuine regret.

"Very well," she announced with outrageous frankness; "then we can go on Wednesday, if you like, Madre, not before."

Bessington got up and bowed to her and she dropped him a curtsey.

Her mother tried to look shocked and failed.

"You see," explained the unabashed Veronica, "Madre always says we should never miss opportunities of making friends. Now Mr. Bessington will be away ever so long, so it is just foolish to miss seeing as much of him as we can while he's here."

She looked at him with perfectly candid eyes. There was no coquetry in her remark; she was merely stating an incontestable truth.

"There is something in it," agreed her mother, "from our point of view, and we won't ask Dominic for his."

He had been lately promoted to the line of friends with Christian names.

"I certainly think Wednesday is the first day possible," he assured them.

"Also it will save Madre rushing things as much as usual. It gives one time to breathe."

Bessington smiled.

"I don't think most people would think four days a long time to prepare for a journey to Corsica."

"They would if they had Madre to deal with."

"Don't you think," put in Mrs. Crofton, "that people make a great deal too much fuss about preparations, as a rule? Things are simple enough if one only knows one's own mind. We shall just go to Genoa, where we know the hotels and wire from there to the best hotel in Ajaccio and take the first good boat across. We never take much luggage. It saves a lot of worry to buy things there if one wants them."

"Madre loves finding she has no clothes and buying native costumes," cried Veronica mischievously.

"Yes, I do, if they are pretty."

Bessington knew instinctively the clothes would be bought if they happened to suit Veronica.

CHAPTER II

"He Who Is Enmeshed in Love's Toils Must Expect to Find His Sight Grow Hazy in the Glamour."

I

It was June before Bessington again visited Priest's Park, though he did not pass through the entire interum without news of Mr. Fraser and incidentally of the Croftons, who did not return to England till April.

From April onwards Bessington's desire to return to Bath augmented each week. He could easily have satisfied the craving by a week-end visit to Mr. Fraser at any time, but it was characteristic of him to force his desire into his habitual harness of self-control, denying it other food than those impressions and recollections stored up in his mind of the two individuals who had, without his will, become such important factors in his life. He fed himself thus, till the impressions became so thin he was in doubt of their reliability. Not, however, with regard to Veronica, be it noted. There his impressions needed neither correction nor superimposition, though they clamoured for more food. He meant to marry Veronica if the will of man could compass it. He still attempted no analysis of her, or of his own love. Its very unreasonableness in the point of age—his and hers—its duration and its poor chances were in his eyes the guarantee of its solidity. This resolution towards marriage grew with the passing months, from the misty condi-

tion of a far-off dream to that of a practicable fact, within measurable distance of accomplishment. In its growth there was also an element of unreason as great or greater than in his love. It was chiefly on account of this ultimate purpose of his that he held in check his desire to visit Bath, for his reason at least recognised Veronica's youth, and the enormous factor Mrs. Crofton must play in the success or failure of his undertaking. It was his impressions of Mrs. Crofton herself that needed clarifying and correcting, and it was the problem of Mrs. Crofton that occupied his outward intelligence, at least so he believed.

Then one Saturday, at the beginning of June, he found himself leaning over the terrace wall at the Haven by Mrs. Crofton's side, watching the tennis that was in progress below them.

He had arrived that morning and found Mrs. Crofton entertaining a house full of girls, and tennis parties the order of the day.

All the way down in the train he had told himself she could not possibly be so young as his memory pictured her, either in person or soul; but, watching her face now, half shaded under her wide hat, he found he could alter no impression. Just so had he seen, in his mind's eye, her oval face and rather tanned complexion with its glow of health; the rather large but well-shaped mouth, at once strong and tender, and the sweeping line of her tall figure. Then she turned to him, and he saw her eyes. Those eyes in which so much more than youth was included. Here was what he had forgotten. He was suddenly conscious that she was older than he, and in a mysterious way he was at once relieved and satisfied at it.

"It's splendid to watch Eve serving. I love the spring and swerve of him." She indicated something vaguely with a sweep of her hand. "It's so good to see young, free things move—the beauty of free ac-

tion, the glory of physical life! No mere work of art conveys it."

"'The Disk Thrower'?" he suggested.

She knitted her brows and then nodded.

"Well, perhaps great things like that suggest it, but it's not suggestion there"—indicating the players again—"it's real! I am not truly artistic, because I always want beautiful things translated into action—great poems, or pictures, or music—what you will. I want to see it alive and manifest—here!" She stopped a moment, and then continued in her half-eager, introspective way: "Of course the very best manifestation is only a shadow of the real thing at present, but it's youth that casts that shadow, and that's why I love young people and young things round me—it's not that they hold promise of greater things, but they are themselves the shadow of them. They are, after all, so much nearer the original thought."

"You are hard on age," he protested.

"Only because age turns its back on youth so quickly and doesn't value it. To keep the divine fire of youth and with it the wider sense that comes of experience, still to possess the faith when it's really hard to have any faith at all—those are the desirable things that set age apart from us if we would only believe it. It's not mere years!"

Bessington frankly abandoned the pretence of watching the game and altered his position so he could watch her face instead.

"Is that your own receipt?" he asked quietly.

"So far as the world permits it," she answered, smiling. "I do love youth and all things that are healthy and strong and beautiful, and children. Not necessarily babies. They are sweet, of course, but they don't cast the shadow of perfection. We don't want them to remain babies—but children like those"—she indicated the players below—"I try in a way to keep

step with them, but experience is always getting in the way of instinct. I know and see what's coming and it's hard sometimes to sit still and let them have the joy of discovery for themselves."

"Sometimes it's not all joy—that discovery," he returned a little grimly.

"But often that is because we can't read correctly. Grown-up people are so ready to point out that what looks like a joy is really a grief, instead of letting them find out for themselves, when they have also had time to learn how difficult it is to know what constitutes real joy or sorrow. Oh, I always feel we have no right to be always instructing them!"

Adam Preston made another brilliant serve and won the set. The girl who was playing with him and who had certainly done her share towards victory accepted the triumph without surprise and seated herself on the bank between the three other girls who were watching.

"She plays well," remarked Dominic.

"Yes; that's Mary Fuller, my god-daughter. She is a dear girl, but she really cares for nothing in the world but outdoor sports. I thought Eve would like her," she added naïvely.

"Does he?"

"He likes her as a tennis partner."

"Who's the girl in pink?"

"Stella Forrester—Mark's sister." Mrs. Crofton spoke rather slowly. They both looked at the pink-gowned girl a moment.

"Don't you think she is pretty?"

Bessington refused to be hurried to a polite judgment. He still took time.

"Her eyes are too big," he said quietly.

"Most people admire big eyes."

There was an intangible something in Mrs. Crofton's voice that brought his attention to her face again.

"It is clear that some one down there admires them," he commented, with a smile.

Mrs. Crofton turned to him with a certainty of finding sympathy and understanding, which revealed to Bessington that their friendship was something more than acquaintanceship.

"I asked her for a day or two because she is Mark's sister and because Eve spent all the Easter vacation fishing in the Wiley Valley, and the Forresters live at Pieceminster. If it really meant nothing, it would get rubbed out best amongst others, and if it were serious it would be better to know. Besides, I really wanted to see what she was like."

It was as if she challenged him to find fault with her invitation or its intention, and he on his part found himself weighing the merits of the case and pronouncing her guiltless at the bar of common sense.

He realised sharply that Mrs. Crofton was a factor of importance in the lives of these young people who surrounded her.

"And what do you think of her?"

She frowned in a puzzled way.

"I am not certain yet. I can see what Eve thinks of her at present, which is perhaps more important"—then quite suddenly she turned to him with obvious consternation—"I don't know in the least why I should be talking to you of all this. Please don't think I am in the habit of discussing other people's affairs with a third person. I can't give you any reason except that it is you, which is quite unreasonable."

She looked so anxious and so entirely oblivious of the compliment to her listener that he felt oddly perturbed at its sincerity, and hastened to assure her that it was not unreasonable, but that he liked to consider himself part of Fafner's establishment as much as she did. Which remark had the success of making

her laugh. She went on hurriedly to relate Mark's history.

Mark had had a post offered him a month ago, on the condition that he could take it at once and sail for India in a week. It meant flinging up the examination, but it had not been all wasted work, as he could not have had the post offered him if he had not had a fair chance of passing the examination. It meant good immediate pay, which weighed heavily with him, and he had gone.

"Alexander was very good about it," she added. "There was always a doubt over Mark's languages."

She did not offer, as she might have done, any explanation as to how the offer came to be made.

It was obvious that with a garden full of guests Mrs. Crofton could not spend the whole afternoon talking to Dominic Bessington. Yet as she moved from one to another she was conscious of his presence in her garden, as of some one to whom she could turn, not for material assistance—any one of the boys were at her command that way—but for that mutual understanding and support that wanted no command, but was there foreseeing and foreknowing. She recognised in Bessington's interest in others something akin to her own quick sympathy, and drew moral support from it. Once, watching him play, a grown man amongst all those slim boys, it crossed her mind that he himself was a shadow, not of perfect youth but of a still more perfect maturity.

II

Another set was over down on the lawn below, and Adam took a well-earned rest. He approached the row of girls sitting on the bank, and Veronica made room for him between herself and Stella Forrester.

Stella, with an almost horrified look, edged nearer to her next neighbour, and though Eve's intention of sitting there was most plainly not to talk to Veronica, he found he had to do so or maintain silence, for Stella had nothing to say to him. He bore it for some time with patience and then told her he had brought some photographs over that he had taken in the Wiley Valley and they were in the house if she cared to see them. If he expected her to jump up and suggest seeing them, then and there, he was disappointed. She did not seem particularly interested, merely remarking it was a pretty part for photography.

Adam got tired of waiting for her mood to change, and went off to umpire for the men.

A little later, when he went to the house to fetch something for Mrs. Crofton, he found Stella in the porch and she asked him, with rather a diffident air, where the photographs were.

Instead of at once gratifying her tardy interest, Eve stood before her and looked at her with puzzled eyes.

"What have I done, Miss Forrester?"

"It was Veronica, not you," she answered hurriedly. "At least I don't know what you mean!"

"You would hardly speak to me down on the lawn just now."

She burst out with curious petulance:

"Why should Veronica assume you wanted to sit by me in that undisguised way?"

Adam looked relieved and even smiled.

"Veronica is good at guessing sometimes, but if you didn't want me to sit by you I'm sorry."

He could not in the least see her point of view, or even recognise she had one apart from his own. It seemed to him quite natural that Veronica should know he would like to sit next to Miss Forrester, who must be very shy if she could be embarrassed by anything Veronica said or did. However, he made his peace,

and took Stella into the drawing-room to see the photos. Stella was quite friendly and nice when they were alone, but unaccountably distant and shy before others. He did not understand it, but put it down to shyness.

Mrs. Crofton watched them both without apparently taking any notice of them. She was puzzled over Mark's sister. It was not that the girl held herself aloof, or was naturally reserved, as that her attitude towards others seemed invariable antagonistic or too obviously conciliatory. Mrs. Crofton could not wholly resist the appealing mournfulness of her eyes; she found herself continually making allowance for something in Mark's sister that was unsatisfactory, though she could not say what it was. She did not make Eve's mistake of thinking her either shy or delicate, both of which imaginary qualities seemed to rouse in him a chivalrous instinct of protection, and which Mrs. Crofton would have been well content to see more dormant. If it had not been for Eve's evident infatuation, she would have come to the conclusion that Stella Forrester was rather "out of the picture" and not destined to become one of her best protégées. Still there was Eve to reckon with, and she would far rather study Stella to point of boredom than leave the very unanalytical Eve to form opinions she was not in a position to counteract. As to why it should be a danger for him to fall even temporarily in love with the sister of his best friend, Mrs. Crofton could neither understand nor explain even to herself. She had no dictum of common sense or even knowledge behind her. She was only aware she instinctively felt there was something prejudicial to his future in the fact, and though contrary to her established custom she did her best to quench the instinct, she never quite succeeded.

Stella, for her part, once she had got over her

first air of hostility to a world of strangers, enjoyed herself immensely at the Haven. She revelled in the beautiful ease of the life, just as she rejoiced with genuine emotion over a fine splash of colour or a lovely dress, just as she seemed to absorb and sink into the small comforts that surrounded her, much as a cat will accommodate itself to the best cushion as one who has at last found a fitted setting for itself.

III

One evening, the third after Bessington's advent, Mrs. Crofton learnt a bit more concerning her puzzling guest.

It was the enchanting hour between dusk and night, and Mrs. Crofton was seated on the lawn feeding on the quiet peace which held the earth in its arms and her with it. Stella came towards her in the dusk across the garden, a grey-clad, fragile figure, hanging on her steps, as if she feared to intrude.

Mrs. Crofton patted the chair beside her.

"Plenty of room," she said encouragingly, and the girl sat down with a sigh.

"Why the sigh?"

Stella turned quickly towards her, and put her hands on Mrs. Crofton's knees. There was just a tinge of artificialness in her movement and attitude, yet Mrs. Crofton could not but be conscious of the pathos of the white face showing faintly in the dying light.

"Everything is so beautiful here and different to other places."

"It's a compliment, but a little unjust to 'other places,' isn't it?"

"Not to those I know. Here, you don't seem to care about understanding things or feeling them. You are just content to live."

"So are cabbages and roses. But seriously, I am that—content to live."

"You don't want to get through to realities, to real things? You don't mind that nothing happens?"

"Things are always happening, my dear. Nice things, too. I've had a lovely day on the river. I've seen Veronica being made to do things by Mr. Bessington which was most amusing. I've seen Eve play tennis—which is always a joy—and I have talked to the evening, which is the biggest happening of all. Sometimes one can do that, and sometimes one can't," she added dreamily; "one has to be in the right key."

"But you don't call those things important parts of life!"

Mrs. Crofton wanted to laugh at the girl's morbidly tragic tone, but she felt also a great pity for her. To be twenty-two and so out of touch with real values, *was* tragic.

"I rather fancy that those sort of things are the best worth happening. Such a lot of people go through the world waiting for thunderclaps to tell them anything, and wasting all the time in between the noise!"

"But the sort of things you mentioned aren't events."

Mrs. Crofton looked out at the lost evening that had given her a renewal of peace as its farewell. She was saddened that from one soul at least it got so poor a response to its benediction.

"Everything that happens is an event. What is the matter with many people is that they can't separate the trivial ones from the eternal ones."

"That's what I mean."

"To really be alive and feel," went on Mrs. Crofton thoughtfully, "one has just to be alive to the things that go on happening every minute, and enjoying them."

"One might hate them."

"Hating them isn't being alive at all. It's being ill. If one keeps one's sense of beauty clean and fresh then one gets to recognise the things that are really worth feeling. And the best things are always coming again and again like the evenings and sunsets and flowers. But people look forward too much, you know, to what *may* happen. Looking forward is letting the future drag you on too fast. It makes young people old. When one's old, one looks back and that's nearly the same thing. It keeps you old. It's the 'now' that matters."

"Don't you ever look forward?" asked Stella curiously. She could make nothing of Mrs. Crofton's point of view, but it roused a dormant curiosity.

"Oh, yes, pleasantly. But I don't invest all my interest in the future. It's here now, in everything one does all day. The future may be full of beautiful things for me, but I am not going to lose what I actually possess in worrying over them to-day."

"It may be full of horrible things."

Mrs. Crofton leant forward and tried to see the half-averted face of the girl. She was sorry for her, but not quite satisfied, as to the cause of her pessimism.

"My dear, what has gone wrong with your to-day that you mistrust to-morrow so bitterly?"

Then, since Stella did not answer, she added quickly,

"Don't tell me, if you don't want to. I did not mean to be curious, but it's all wrong, your thinking like that!"

Stella leant back in her chair and still seemed to hesitate. She meant to tell Mrs. Crofton her story, or at least some of it. She could not have resisted the temptation in any case, and she was possessed with the odd idea that Mrs. Crofton would understand it better than any one else. Her hesitation was due to the

doubt as to whether Mark had told this friend of his his own version of the episode she chose to consider had spoilt her life. Stella's lack of capacity to understand others extended to her brother, of whom she might reasonably be expected to know something, but whose springs of action were undiscovered country to his sister. It would not have displeased her to be the subject of discussion with a stranger, but she was not certain that Mark's account would be sympathetic.

"I should like to tell you," she said slowly. "I was only seventeen when I fell in love with a man who pretended to care for me. Then I found out he was married. I ought to have been very angry, I suppose, but I was only wretched. Every one seemed to think it was my fault. I wrote to him, which I suppose will shock you, and when he did not answer the letter I went to see him. Mark fetched me back and there was a terrible scene between him and Mark. After that I was"—she hesitated a second—"I was ill and nervous, and Mark made Mother send me to a doctor in Germany. I was very miserable there, but I got better. Now I am home again. Every one in the place knows I cared for the man, and they are not nice to me, and Mother goes on thinking my heart is broken, and that all is over for me. Sometimes I think so, too. It is dreadful to be only twenty and feel all is over!"

The real tragedy in her voice was terrible, whatever the cause. Yet, even so, some note in it prevented Mrs. Crofton taking the girl in her arms and showing her where lay the true tragedy of her dull little story. She felt at heart that what Stella needed was not pity so much as bracing criticism and she gave it as kindly and gently as only she could do.

"But it's hardly begun! You must never allow yourself to think that because you've made a mistake once, that life's going to cast it back on you all the

time! If that were so, where would any of us be? We all make mistakes some time or other. The greatest mistake of all is to go on remembering it. Of course," she went on dreamily, after a little pause, in which Stella made a faint movement of her hands, dimly discernible in the dark—she had white and pretty hands—"of course, Love is never trivial. It always stands for something in life, whether it's a mistake or not, as to the final result. Every time one falls in love, till the big thing comes along, one should find one's capacity for love deepen and widen. It's all going to school. Here and there one gets a soul with a genius for love that needs no schooling, but springs to its pinnacle at once, but for most of us ordinary mortals training is necessary."

Most assuredly Stella was experiencing something new now, if she could recognise it. It was not the first time she had told her story, though she had never related it in precisely those cold, dull words before; but it had never been received in quite this spirit, and the novelty was not displeasing.

"Most people believe one can only love once," she said doubtfully. She was not going to succumb to Mrs. Crofton too easily. She must feel sure, before she abandoned her rôle of unhappy heroine, that she would reap some advantage from a change of view.

"Most people are—stupid," laughed the other. "It would be a sad life for many if one could only love once! I am not speaking," she went on, with a deeper note in her voice, "of that love I call genius, but of that which falls to the lot of most of us mortals. God help us if we are only to feel it once in our lives! You'll fall in love again some day—oh, yes, you will. There are plenty of nice, honest, straight men in the world worth loving, and a very good touchstone of the worth of the love you have to offer them is whether, in loving, you find your heart opens wider to all the

rest of the world, or shuts itself up and the man you love with it. If it does that, it's not genuine but spurious love. What you have to do is to stop thinking once and for all about what you call your mistake. It's done with. You have learnt something. Learnt, for example, that love can override all conventions. I expect it was quite a real thing, that love of yours, for the time. But don't take what's happened too seriously. Almost every other woman you meet will have made a muddle over her love affairs some time or other. Either she hasn't recognised it, or she's missed it, or she's lost it. If we were all to sit down and think our life was ended because love for the nonce had flown out of the window, it would be a dull world. I think," she added, bending forward and stroking Stella's arm gently, "that it was nice of you to tell me about it. Now make up your mind to bury it and never, never own you are beaten, because of one little experience."

Stella wondered, as she followed Mrs. Crofton indoors, whether any particular meaning lay behind her words. Had she, or had she not, noticed Adam Preston's behaviour?

Veronica and Bessington were in the drawing-room at the piano. There was a shadow of reproach in Bessington's eyes as he met Mrs. Crofton's apologetic look. The meshes that drew him were very tangled now. He had had a fight with himself to resist the lure of the night and a walk which Veronica proposed. The night was for lovers and he was not yet a declared one. He thought with vague unreason that Mrs. Crofton ought to have known to what a trial her long absence had put his ideas of fit and proper behaviour.

Stella Forrester went away two days after her talk with Mrs. Crofton. Her regret at leaving was undoubtedly a shade more genuine than the kindly

worded farewells of her new friends. Veronica's sole remark, when she was actually gone, was, "Poor old Mark! How she must bore him!" Mr. Fraser said diffidently to his sister that he did not consider Miss Forrester quite like her usual guests, to which she had replied that, "One pattern made for monotony," but in her heart of hearts she was glad that Stella had gone and a little ashamed of it. It was impossible to discover any adequate reason for her strange sensation of mistrust. She was not unused to meeting girls with a morbid tendency, and not infrequently acted as a very efficient doctor for the insidious disease. But in this case her will to do anything was strangely dormant. She was sorry for Stella, and for Mark's sake she wanted to do what she could for her. But she was a creature of instinct. The help she gave so liberally to her world was spontaneous. She laid no plans, she acted on no rule, she did not even correctly gauge her own use. Only when occasions came her way and she felt the impulse to straighten out some tangle or help some prematurely crippled wayfarer along the road, she acted on that impulse to the full measure. Here no impulse was behind her. Nothing stronger than a mere wish to be kind, if she could, to Mark Forrester's sister.

She had driven to the station with Stella to see her off and found Adam there. He professed less surprise at seeing them than Stella did at his presence. He supplied her with papers and chocolates to last two such journeys as lay before her. Afterwards he drove back with Madre and talked of the latest comic opera till they were mounting the hill. Then, when a little silence had fallen between them, Mrs. Crofton said:

"How did you know that Stella was going by this train?"

"She told me so last night."

"She only settled it this morning."

He gave a little frown and moved uneasily.

"Well, I suppose she wasn't quite sure till this morning. She said she might go by it."

That might certainly have been true. Felicity gave her the benefit of the doubt.

"She seemed very surprised to see you."

"I hadn't said I was coming."

She found it harder to give Stella the benefit this time. If she had mentioned a time at all to Adam, it should have been perfectly clear to her he would probably turn up at that time. She sighed a little.

"Miss Forrester is shy," said Adam abruptly, "and she gets nervous and confused when people are just decently polite to her. I should think the poor girl had a pretty rotten time of it, altogether. Pieceminster is an awful hole."

"She is pretty, don't you think, Adam?"

"Ripping, but awfully delicate. I wonder if she is properly looked after."

"Her mother is quite old and seems wrapped up in Mark."

"It was jolly of you to ask her, Madre."

"I did it to oblige Mark, not you," she answered, laughing.

"So I supposed."

She looked him straight in the face.

"Are you in love wth her, Eve?"

He met her eyes quite frankly, but she was aware of a veil dropped between his real thought and herself.

"I'm sorry for her," he said. "Girls seem to have a beastly time. I'm glad I'm not one!"

"And you would make such a pretty one!" she returned teasingly, just in revenge for his lack of confidence in her.

"Every one has their misfortune to bear."

He would not give her a chance of "rotting" him.

He was aware that she was the least bit hurt by his evasion of her direct question. He liked being treated directly, as Madre well knew, and he would have liked to give her a direct answer, but he did not know himself what the answer was, and at present he was not particularly anxious to know. Stella Forrester interested him in a disturbing way. She was pretty. She looked delicate and she was unhappy. He hated to see anything unhappy that was unable to help itself; and she was, he thought, very shy. He imagined he understood her completely, that she was afraid of him for some silly reason which rather put him on his mettle to prove his own harmlessness. In his heart of hearts he thought he was in love, but he prided himself on being sufficiently level-headed to know that love had no serious place in the timetable of a young man aspiring to a commission in His Majesty's army, and he had no particular inclination for a flirtation, at least with "a poor, hardly used, little thing" like Mark's sister. It was more satisfactory to think he really did not know his own mind, and that that was lucky, since it was quite evident that Miss Forrester did not care for him!

Mrs. Crofton was a little comforted. She had never deceived herself into imagining that Adam's lack of impressibility was a sign of incapacity for passion, once he was roused. But she decided that he hadn't been roused by Stella Forrester, and, considering their respective ages, that it was a fortunate thing. She slept much the better for having come to that decision.

IV

Bessington saw more of Mrs. Crofton than of her daughter during the following sunny days. It was of deliberate intent on his part and not of necessity, for Veronica included him in every undertaking and

was only resignedly tolerant of his preoccupation with her mother. To Bessington himself the whole atmosphere was so impregnated with Veronica, the whole little world so revolved round her, that he felt he could not in the present position of affairs bear her actual presence too often if he was to retain his hold on solid ground. He retained it best in Mrs. Crofton's company. His liking grew with his appreciation of that intangible sense of fellowship which seemed the very essence of her being. He began to understand how in her company the sorrows of the world became not more supportable but of less consequence, mere ghosts of an unreal victory; how even evil things seemed to loose their primary significance in her way of viewing them from a new standpoint.

One small conversation on these matters remained very firmly fixed in his mind. They had been speaking of some obscure and ugly newspaper case—it was not Bessington who brought it up, but Mr. Fraser, who had diffidently warned Felicity that the daily paper would be unedifying reading for Veronica that day.

"As much as interests her will be," said Felicity cheerfully. "Veronica can't endure anything ugly. She'd turn her back on all shadows if she could!"

When her brother had gone, she spoke again to Bessington as if her words required explanation.

"That is quite true about Veronica. She really wouldn't be interested. Of course I know all girls are not like that. The world labels certain things as evil and the very label spreads the disease. Yet even in this case there are conceivably countries where the whole affair would be regarded in the light of virtue. The label does mischief."

"But some things are fundamentally evil," he argued.

Felicity knit her brows in a puzzled way.

"Yes, that is so—and yet what is evil?"

"The world still awaits that definition."

"Well, I think evil is not an entity in itself. It is a comparative condition. It is that which is incompatible to the ideal of God. Think it out. You will see how it fits and simplifies matters."

She did not often give him glimpses of her hidden beliefs and secret faiths in this way, but he grew aware of their existence, aware that her infectious joy in the present and her keen appreciation of visible life was built upon a foundation hewn with laborious thought out of the very centre of her soul.

He also, in these few days, made a discovery concerning her relationship to Veronica, which seemed to create a fresh tie between them, although unvoiced and unvoicable.

Felicity's passionate love for her child was not only maternal instinct. Veronica was to her something more than a being of her own making, she was an incarnation of that youth and joyousness which she held as the essence of life. She would watch Veronica with precisely the same glow of sharp pleasure she experienced in watching Eve. All her movements, her smiles, her grace, her exquisite beauty, stirred her with a rapture that was purely impersonal. Bessington conceived the idea that to maintain that beauty and grace and that immaculate spirit of youth, Felicity Crofton had sacrificed and would sacrifice herself without a murmur, and that the little strain of selfishness in Veronica—of which Bessington was fully aware—was due to this. Felicity, with the courageous eyes, accepted Veronica's little easy shirking of the disagreeables in life with a smile and shouldered any extra trouble incurred cheerfully. And Bessington shared her sentiments. He, too, would preserve Veronica as she was. That very selfishness sprang from the clean egoism of youth, which believes the world its own eternal heritage. He sat talking to Mrs. Crofton one day

while Veronica played with a puppy on the lawn, and sometimes Mrs. Crofton would lose the thread of talk and find it tangled up with the puppy's string, and sometimes Bessington found his companion's clear voice become dim and uncertain, lost behind an echo of pretty laughter, and the garden shut out in a golden haze.

For Veronica stirred him as nothing on earth had stirred him; taught him primitive truths that he had merely accepted hitherto as physiological facts; destroyed his balance, upset his reason, and created of his ordinary alert mind a chaos she alone could restore to order.

As to what chance he stood with regard to Veronica's favour, he could form no conception of it. She made no disguise of the fact that she liked him. She showed a spirit of complete friendliness; she was disposed to grumble a little at what she considered her mother's monopoly of him. All this was not love; not even the beginning of it. Yet now and again Bessington caught a fugitive glance in her candid eyes that made him catch his breath, for it opened gates of wonder. It was as if the Hidden Woman, the still sleeping princess, stirred in her sleeping. There was some faint movement in the flower petals round her, some deeper, slower breathing than the quick, light breaths of the child. None but he must wake her. This wonder of womanhood must be for him alone, must wake for him, stay with him, be his alone! The mere thought of such a possibility flooded his soul with alternate day and night of pride and humbleness. Yet in his heart he knew he wanted Veronica's mother to stand by him and see this miracle, and be content with it and him!

V

Alexander Fraser watched all three. His habitual air of anxious solicitude towards his sister took on a

new tenderness. Watching her, his mind would go back over the stormy years to the difficult, impossible days when he was already a grown man, struggling towards the shore of attainment on the plank of scholarships, and Felicity was a child fretting with all her restless energy and fearless courage against the narrow limits to existence decreed by an aunt, whose horizon was bounded by the strictest convention and whose ambitions saw no further than a "suitable" marriage. He thought with a renewed access of pity of those strong, young wings beating against barriers the young eyes could not see. He thought of that hastily arranged, most desirable marriage—the desperate, ignorant spring for liberty, into a cage whose barriers were visible enough and of iron. Of the struggle there he would not think, indeed he knew nothing of it; it was hidden in a silence that had never been broken by words.

Then the golden, sunny years of freedom. The fulness of life and the unquenched spirit of youth, blossoming so bravely, undaunted by its retarded spring. He still thought of Felicity as a girl to whom all was still possible. He understood her steady refusal to marry, but then he had never yet seen the man he considered entitled to marry her. So he had hitherto thought. Now he was less sure!

VI

"You don't shine at steering, Veronica, either in a boat or a toboggan," sighed Bessington, as he pulled the boat's head out of a bed of rushes for the third time.

"I prefer some one else doing it. Besides, how can one steer and talk?"

"It's been done," he asserted cheerfully. "Would *you* rather row?"

"Not for worlds! I am far too comfortable."

She looked it. She looked also the personification of a June day. The cushions round her were green, her dress white, and under the shadow of her wide hat her blue eyes looked at him with meditative content. He wondered why at times they were so inscrutable. They seemed to hold no medium between sweet fresh candour and this meditative secrecy.

But Bessington had not yet arrived at the point when he could discuss her eyes with her, so he returned to the question of steering.

"I could make shift, perhaps, to row and steer, too," he suggested, expecting to see her flash with indignation. Instead, she dropped the tiller lines with a sigh of relief.

"How clever of you. I thought no one but Eve could do that. You ought to have a little glass fixed in front of you so you could see what's coming."

"Who would believe you were the energetic player of tennis this morning," he groaned, with pretended indignation.

"One can't be energetic all day. Never in a boat. I wish Madre could have come! She steers beautifully."

Bessington felt he ought to have resented the wish, even on the merits of steering, but though he had been and was still exhilarated with the joy of rowing Veronica all by herself up the shady reaches of the river, he did not feel that Mrs. Crofton's presence would have interfered very greatly with that joy. She would so have appreciated the river—and Veronica!

"I can't imagine why people think they have a right to send for Madre directly something unpleasant happens," grumbled Veronica, but as one tired of this particular complaint.

"I can imagine why they want to," he answered, pulling hard again.

"Oh, yes. But, after all, one wants lots of things one doesn't ask for. If Mr. Lyle had died when we were abroad, Mrs. Lyle would have had to do as she could. Well, I am glad I'm not Madre!"

"You don't like depressing things?"

"No, I don't!" quite vehemently. "Who does? Only some people know what to do and say when they come up against them and some don't—I don't! I want to run away at once and look at something nice."

She was entirely unashamed of her unheroic attitude, and Bessington was not much concerned by it. It would have concerned him far more to see her struggling to do violence to her feelings in the face of ugly facts. Since there were no ugly facts, however, he permitted himself one question.

"Suppose there was no one but you to deal with it?"

"Then I suppose I should have to face it. But I hope sincerely there always will be—some one else!"

She trailed her hand idly in the water, the rudder lines lying limply beside her.

Through the grey-green foliage of the willows the bordering meadows glowed golden with sunlight and buttercups. Beside the reed beds the brown rippling water offered wavering reflections and caught and played roughly with the trailing water plants and flowers that bordered the edges. There was a little creek ahead, and Bessington's intention was to turn into it. Apparently he altered his mind, and instead rowed on rather rapidly. His quick eyes had seen, as he glanced round, a dead dog lying on the bank half in and half out of the water.

He hoped she had not seen it. It was an instinctive hope, absurdly strong. She was gazing ahead, leaning forward with her chin on her hands. Her eyes not smiling, but full of mysterious shadows.

They shot round a bend of the river and he heard

her give a little sigh of relief. He knew then she had seen it.

A golden afternoon—a golden hour! Bessington forgot his intention of studying what lay behind this beautiful child. What did it matter when the Veronica before his eyes made his head swim with joy of beholding, when her voice set a song to the accompaniment of a whole world of lovely things! It was quite enough that she existed. He did not want to understand. He lured her on to nonsense again, and she followed his lure so easily. The shadow in her eyes disappeared and the smile took its place. A golden hour!

They rowed up as far as the Rapids, and drifted home again in the sunset. Once when the river before and behind them was empty, she broke into song. He let the boat drift along while he listened. When she had finished her little verse, he just nodded approval.

"What are you going to do with your voice?" he asked meditatively.

"Sing to Madre. What should I do with it?"

"Sing to the world!"

She laughed. "The world has got plenty of people to sing to it and it doesn't interest me. Would you like me to sing to it?"

"Not at all," he returned a little grimly. "I was speaking conventionally. People are always supposed to do something when they have a gift. I am glad you are not conventional."

Presently she grew silent for so long that he asked her what she was thinking about.

"I was thinking what a lot of nice days there are in a year, and how I should like to make a necklace of them to wear forever."

"To-day with them?" he demanded, with a sense of breathlessness.

"Yes; it's been lovely—and I'd thread it on the sunset. Look at it!"

He turned and saw the transfigured sky all rose and gold. Little detached clouds, like the pink petals of a fallen rose, were scattered about the sky. The light spread and spread and flooded the river, dyed the back eddies crimson, and turned the bordering willows to gold.

"I will make a necklace, too," he said in rather a low voice, whereat she laughed.

"Men can't wear them! It would be no use to you!"

"I could give it away," he answered slowly.

"Well, you can't take to-day, because I've bespoken it."

Of all the hundred pretty answers he might have made her he uttered none. Had the sleeping princess stirred, or was it his fancy? Madre would know. It was the first time he had caught himself actually thinking of her so by the endearing Italian name they one and all gave her. Madre, then, was the guardian of this Princess, and without her permission he could take no step further on this great adventure. He would lose no more time.

CHAPTER III

"The Man of Her Choice"

I

It was Sunday evening. The little party from the Haven, Alexander Fraser, his guest, and a few pupils, were seated on the wide steps of the south front of Priest's Park. The day had been hot and airless, but with sunset a little freshness had drifted across the earth. The long beds below the steps were full of white lilies and the scent of them hung on the air. Westward over the tree-tops the faint afterglow of a solemn sunset clung to the sky, and far below them the grey city set out her innumerable stars in faint reproach to a starless sky, where later the moon would take command. Now at this hour between dusk and dark a mantle of opalescent tints was wrapped round the earth and invited peace. Down in the woods a nightingale sang fitfully, as not yet sure of an audience.

The little group talked by fits and starts, mostly of trivial things, for young men (and they predominated) are not prone to give away their appreciation of nature's moods. Alexander Fraser himself leant back in his chair, thinking of far-off days beyond the reach of memory, and it was Felicity who put his unspoken thoughts into words.

"I love to think," she said slowly, "how long ago, when there was no city here, down there, nor any work

of man visible, the evenings came on just like this and the earth waited for the moonrise as we wait, and it was all just as lovely and perfect as now, though no man saw it. It gives a sort of surety to it going on even when men are not here."

"Going on still richer in beauty," put in her brother; "for isn't all this before us the richer for the thoughts that it has inspired in men? At least we are richer who have learnt to see not only with our eyes but theirs, too!"

Veronica, who was leaning against his chair, thinking of nothing in particular, but just blissfully happy because it was all so nice and comfy and pretty, said:

"There won't be anything original to think of soon, so I am glad I am alive now, before it's all quite used up."

"Like a queen enchanted who may not laugh or weep,"

"How does it go on?" began a voice.

"Girt about by beauty by days and nights that creep,
Soft as breathless ripples that softly shoreward creep,
Lies the lovely city whose grace no grief deflowers"

so quoted Felicity.

"I suppose that means it hasn't any tragic history," said Adam. "All the same, there's a good deal down there which isn't grace, if the poet Johnny means beauty. It's all right from *here,* looking down."

"One has to be up high before one can look down at anything," retorted Veronica.

"I never could understand poetry," he answered unabashed.

"Swinburne's all right," put in the first voice that had started the quotation. "He doesn't go messing round with daisies and cockleshells. He writes about *big things.*"

"Mountains and railway engines," suggested Veronica wickedly. "And what has size to do with it?"

"Subject, not size, matters," said the first speaker rather sulkily.

Veronica soothed him down.

"I know you are right, of course. Madre loves Swinburne. But I'm like Eve. I can't really understand poetry; only when the words come in a nice, flowing, rolling sort of way I love to hear it. It mesmerizes me."

Alexander Fraser began in a soft undervoice to recite a Greek poem. Veronica, completely happy, snuggled against his chair again.

"That's lovely," she said, as he finished. "And I don't in the least want to know what it's about. Sounds are much nicer than meanings."

The others laughed and proceeded to tease her mildly by quoting long lines, genuine and spurious, which she proceeded to criticise.

Meanwhile Felicity and Dominic Bessington had gone away. He had seen her rise and go towards the lily bed and stop there to scent up their fragrance and he followed her. They both walked to the end of the long path in silence and went down the steps to the lower terrace. They had not spoken for some minutes, and when they did Bessington went straight to the point.

"I want to talk to you about Veronica, Mrs. Crofton," he said quietly.

She did not answer at once. She had not been wholly unprepared for this; indeed, she had fancied herself well prepared, but now it was on her, the event was more pregnant with meaning than she had thought, and it was shot with an odd streak of pain which she pushed away from her consciousness sternly yet with uneasy wonder.

"What of Veronica?" she asked at length.

"I want to marry her. Oh, I don't mean now at once, but I want your leave to try to make her like me——" He drew a long breath and waited.

"Go on," she said in a half-whisper; "that's not all you want to say."

"No, it's not half of it, but it's the gist of it. I know she is young, too young; but you must remember I have not many chances of seeing her, and if I wait without having done anything, some one else may step in and wake her while I am away."

She, in turn, drew a deep breath. "Wake her? Yes, it's like that! Well, what else?"

"She does not know much of me, and you know very little more. She has not had much time to look about her, but even you can't say that she has not met other men, or that she's seen nothing of the world. You may think I am too old for her. I am twenty-eight. I have never wanted to marry any one before and I shall never want to marry any one else."

"And you want to ask me if you may marry her?"

He had never thought her voice could be so expressionless, and it roused a fear in his heart that he would not permit to grow.

"No," he said doggedly. "I ask your permission to try for myself to make her want to marry me and, if I succeed, your permission to do so."

Over the edge of the wood before them the rim of the moon appeared. The nightingale decided he had found his full voice and broke into song. But Felicity still gazed into the shadows of the wood, and the face which she kept turned from Bessington was white.

"I don't know if I need say to you that I love her," he went on, the steadiness of his voice giving way a little. "I know it is love. I cannot reason with myself over it or I should not be here now, considering her age. But whether it's reasonable or not, I want her, whatever happens."

Still she kept silence and he was aware of her tension now, though he mistook its cause.

He concluded with a certain humbleness of tone that caught her by surprise.

"Whether I am the kind of man you would be willing to give her up to, I can not guess. That is why I speak to you first. I know you and she are part of one another. If you were set against me I should have little chance with her and you may have different plans for her."

"If I had?"

"I should go on wanting her."

"You would give up trying?"

"Only while she is so young. I might not be the one to wake her then, but I should hope still to be the one to win her."

"Against my wish?"

"You have made plans?"

The reproach in both questions broke the tension. Felicity turned to him.

"Plans? Yes, perhaps against my better judgment I *have* had plans, or rather I have indulged in dreams! What Mother does not? Oh, you men!" she cried with sudden sharp passion. "How can a mother *not* dream, not struggle with the thought that somewhere out in the world there lives a man who will one day come and take her child from her and finish the work she has begun—make it or mar it! How many women's hearts ache with desire to get at this man, to take him and probe into the depths of his soul; to say to him: 'This is what you must do and this what you must not do if you want her happiness and your own!' How many of us long to have the training of him, to have some hand in preparing him for the happiness he seeks, to which you will have contributed just a half! For a mother, Dominic, can only give the man something incomplete, and she can

tell him so little, warn him so little of all the trifles that may shatter her child's happiness and yet all the while she sees, oh, so much more clearly than he sees, both the real beauty and the real faults. She knows the possibilities, he only guesses them, often never even thinks of them!"

She stopped abruptly and turned away again.

"The bravest of us must fear. We are so helpless before custom! You talk of age! There is no question of age if you can wake her; of our separation—but it is the end for which one has worked, that one's child should find completeness, and *that* she can only do through the right man!"

"And who is the right man?" he questioned slowly.

She turned to him impulsively, looking straight in his face. There was light enough now for him to see behind the agitation there a glimmer of great courage, of sudden resolution, and he wondered.

"If I could choose of all the men who have come and gone in my life," she said slowly, "I should choose to give my child to you, Dominic."

For one moment her strange agitation communicated itself to him. He was aware of curious tension, of unexplained possibilities, of drifting dreams, and then as suddenly it passed and she caught his hands, and he, holding them, felt them trembling. He bent his head and kissed them.

Felicity stood quite still, almost without breathing. She was trying to recall what it was she had said, and then his quiet steady voice reassured her.

"I don't know how I have earned that, but if I can win her I will do all a man may do to make her as happy as you have done."

"You will do more than that," she answered earnestly, "because you will ask more of her. I have always asked for too little, and I have been content to be grateful."

He wanted to tell her she was reversing facts, but some sense of humility before a knowledge at which he only guessed, kept him dumb.

Felicity also seemed to find it difficult to speak, but she smiled at him instead and presently said:

"Come and see me to-morrow. There are things still to say, but I can't speak more of it to-night. It seems to mean more than I expected. Will you go back to them? I am going home. You can bring Veronica back."

He recognised a renunciation in her words and he wished with great unreason to annul it, but her wish was law and he went away reluctantly. Once he looked back. She was standing with her hands resting on the balustrading, her face turned to the now fully risen moon. She was very upright, very still, very solitary.

Dominic did not at once rejoin the party on the steps. He sat down in the long colonnade, thinking deeply.

Felicity continued to stand there facing this experience that had so nearly swept her from her customary balance. She had not been taken by surprise. The possibility of such an event had been before her for some time, had even been wished for. Nor was it entirely her maternal solicitude which she had figured so vividly and which had been hers for long years, that was disturbed. Most certainly it was not distrust of her daughter's lover. The deeper her reason strove to probe into the matter the more swiftly did her soul pile up barriers between that reason and some deep living truth it was not to face.

The earth looked cold and solitary in the moonlight. Black shadows chequered with pallid light; a mere reflection of a light that was dead! She shivered, with something like terror clutching her heart. To Veronica then—to her darling—was to be given

an escape from the coldness and solitude that life sometimes doles out to mortals. She would be happy. She had been given the right letters to spell happiness, and here was one who would teach her the right way to put them together. Happy Veronica! Lucky Veronica! . . .

And because it seemed to breathe of distant disloyalty towards her child, she fiercely resented the dim questioning whisper as to whether it was the surest consummation for his happiness also!

"I am glad, glad, glad," she said steadily, "that it is Dominic! It is true I would have chosen him out of scores of men for her, and I know he will win her. Oh, you lucky, lucky Veronica! Only those who have failed know how lucky you are!"

Again the inner being in her soul fled behind its barriers. She held out her hands to the moon.

"You, if your moon soul is still alive, ought to know what it means," she whispered. "I wonder if you still feel the light you give!" And presently she turned and went into her own house.

After she had gone, Dominic returned to the steps where the little party were still sitting.

II

"Veronica will have plenty of money. It has been accumulating. I have never touched it," said Felicity.

She launched the statement at Bessington almost before he had taken the chair she indicated to him.

The question of money was so remote from his thoughts that he positively started, and for the moment could find nothing to say in answer.

"I have my aunt's money—and my settlement money. Alexander insisted on my keeping that."

Behind her level, unemotional voice Bessington could distinguish a hardly schooled passionate distaste

for the subject. His impulse was to stop her, to assure her he needed no explanation nor had thoughts of any, but he held himself silent with an effort, divining that since she was forcing herself to face some facts she would not do it without cause and her effort must not go for nothing.

"I was married before I was eighteen. He was much older than I was. My aunt thought it a good marriage. He was rich and of good family and I think he was in love with me. But he was a scientist and his work lay in Germany. We lived there. He loved the Germans—their ways, their ideas of women and life and I—well, I hated it all—most especially their ideas of women. I have never been to Germany since!"

Bessington remembered in a flash that he had never heard her mention Germany as a scene of any of their many travels. He looked at her fine still face so resolutely kept in hand so that not so much as a fleeting expression should betray those stronger feelings that burned again in her heart at this facing of the past.

"I do not think my husband had ever been young in his life, poor man! Still, matters might not have been so bad as they were if his people had not disapproved of me—of the marriage, indeed. They were always on the lookout for mistakes—and I made a big one. It was about three months before Veronica was born. I was terribly unhappy, and fighting against all the little futile arrangements that custom and the country decreed for me and my child—and I ran away! I came to England, to Alexander. I could not have managed it alone then, but there was a young Englishman in Frankfort whom I knew and who was the soul of chivalry and goodness and about as unwise as I myself, with the very best intentions. He helped me to get away. Edward's people made capital out of that, added facts which were not true. I learnt after-

wards that he meant to get a divorce—or separation, and that if it were a girl I might keep it and if it were a boy he would keep it. He was coming to England to fetch me and see to this—and he had a memorandum of it all on him. He was killed in a railway accident on the way."

If she could have shown any emotion at all—even relief, Bessington thought—it would be more bearable than her dead, level voice going over this thing that had hurt her so terribly, that she could feel no more on its account.

"You see why I could not touch the money. But it's right for Veronica to have it. His people have never forgiven me. They considered him a genius—perhaps he was—and he was working at some great discovery. They have never had anything to do with either Veronica or me."

"That is one point to the good," he said quickly.

"I felt you ought to know. Veronica's husband would have to know."

He leant over the little table which stood between them and put his hands on hers.

"There was no need. But I am more than glad that I can keep Veronica without her inheritance. It will just be—extra, for her."

She turned to him swiftly with a little flush of surprise on her face.

"There is no need of that, Dominic. You would always work of course, but it could be how you please."

"It will be as now," he answered firmly. "I, too, would not touch for myself—his money."

She clasped her hands together till they whitened under the pressure and there was a flash of something almost like fear in her eyes, but it was gone almost instantly.

"But we are talking," he said hurriedly, "as if I had already won Veronica.

She turned to him with a strange little smile, and he knew the other subject was forever buried between them.

"As if you could fail when you have set your heart on it!" Then she went on quickly, as one who had a grip of the practical issues at last. "I should not wish Veronica to marry for a year yet. She was eighteen in May last. You must come to us as often as you can. You may get engaged as soon as you like, but a year hence is soon enough for you to marry."

"I wish I could take it for granted as you do!" he said ruefully.

"If you are asking for personal assurance of Veronica's feelings towards you, I cannot give you anything of the sort for I know nothing," she answered swiftly. "I have told you my belief. It is for you to justify it!" She conveyed the impression that his failure would overwhelm her with disappointment.

Felicity rose and went out of the open French window into the rose garden, and he followed her. Her tall slim figure moved a little before him for half the length of the walk, then she stopped by a bush of Madam Lombard and called his attention to the pale delicate tint of a new bud.

"Isn't it sweet?" murmured Felicity, her light fingers caressing the creamy petals. "It wants to be liked."

"But I like this better; it means more," said Bessington quickly, pointing to a dark glowing bud on a bush near that reached out green leafy hands to them, claiming notice. With sudden audacity, seeing it was not his garden, he picked it and handed it to her.

She stood still with a flood of colour sweeping over her face, and then taking it put it in her dress without a word of thanks, and as she was looking down he could not see how her eyes were shining, yet he knew he had pleased her.

A sound of singing came trilling up to them from the lower garden.

"There's Veronica back from the village," said Felicity hastily. "I expect she will want you to play tennis or something. I am engaged this morning."

She smiled at him with complete good fellowship and he smiled back and went towards the singing, but once he looked back at her, as he had the night before.

How young, how absurdly young she looked! Had he really noticed a faint little sprinkle of grey about her temples or was it the sunlight that flecked her hair?

The story and all the part of it she had never told any one, was done with. It might have cut short the wonderful spring of her youth, as cruel frosts in May will blacken the promise of the year; but still, with summer, had come new life, full, and perfect, surely as beautiful as any promise of spring! Nevertheless he—Bessington—would never willingly touch what had been that man's fortune if some good fate should put him in a position to do so. It would have seemed to him disloyalty to a friend!

Veronica came round the corner of the house, and straightway one forgot that it was a summer's day. It had never been more than spring. Spring with a song in her mouth, and a laugh in her eyes! Bessington felt himself swept from all reason and common sense. She ceased her singing, greeted him with frankest pleasure, and carried him off to pick strawberries.

Felicity lingered a little in the rose garden, picking off dead roses and giving half-hearted attention to the needs of some favourites. Now and again her fingers wandered to the rose she had tucked into her dress, to make sure it had not fallen out. It was too good a bud to waste with careless dropping. She took it out and looked at it, just to be sure it came up to

her expectations of that particular bush. It had been rather clever of Dominic to guess it was her favourite rose, though of course that was chance. They had stopped near it. Roses spoilt so soon if one wore them, that she would go and put it in water.

She went to the house and up to her room, and eventually the Princess de Sagen reposed in a little glass by her bed.

III

A river excursion had again been proposed by either Dominic or Veronica, but Felicity had excused herself on the score, first of being tired, then that it was too hot, and then had promptly contradicted herself and said it was "letters."

They had both protested strongly against all these excuses but failed to move her, and had finally given it up. Felicity had overheard Dominic telling Veronica to give orders that some one saw that she had her tea and did not forget it.

When they had gone she did not fall to on the letters of which she had spoken. It seemed more as if the first spontaneous excuse had been the real one. She lay back in her chair for some time doing nothing at all, and when she realised it, did nothing to remedy the occasion. She just continued to do nothing.

There were many things she could do. The letters really existed or ought to exist, the rose garden needed attention, there was embroidery on Veronica's new frock to finish; more awful still, a long-owed call wrought a discord in her sense of deserved rest.

She very often sat doing nothing, for she had the power of repose, but to-day she was aware of a lack of desire, of interest, of a sudden lack indeed of interest, or purpose in life!

For the past five years she had been moving steadily

towards a certain event. That event was now on her; not accomplished yet, but to be accomplished. Until it were so she was but marking time with life, hastening towards—nothing! Fleeing from—nothing! Bereft of purpose!

She never entertained the idea that Dominic might fail in his suit, and she never entertained the least doubt of the desirability of it. There was something oddly personal in both of these certainties, which, considering the fact that she had never and would never coerce Veronica into even a habit of thought, might have merited meditation on her part. But meditation on the subject of Veronica's marriage was the last thing she permitted herself.

The thought that troubled her and made her hands move restlessly was, what purpose in life was she to pursue when Veronica was married!

She had never faced this fact before.

There were a dozen protégés and god-daughters in whose affairs of the heart she had more than a passing interest. But for the moment the interest was faint. She told herself that was only because it was overshadowed by Veronica's affairs for the time and that when these were settled these others would take their place, but she was not quite convinced. If only she had other daughters—or a son!

She left off all attempts to be sensible and let her imagination present her with pictures of the sort of girl she would choose as wife for this imaginary son. Then she desisted because she couldn't manage that obstreperous boy without calling in advice from Dominic—and he might not like his brother-in-law!

He would, though! Any boy would like Dominic!

She came back to the point she had started from with faint irritation. It was an empty affair—imagining. Also it was rather an empty world.

Adam Preston came in through the open window and brought with him a breath of vitality and vigour. He was dressed in immaculate white, and he was perfectly at home, making no apology for his entrance or presence.

"Madre, you are very idle."

"Why shouldn't I be idle?"

He sat on the edge of a chair, dangling his hat in his hand. His whole attitude and air conveyed the impression that he was a petitioner.

"There's every reason why you should do something."

"Which means you want me to do something?"

"Yes. I want you to come for a spin in the car."

Adam's last extravagance was a small "runabout," the best of its kind. Needless to say, Mr. Fraser had protested against its presence, but weakly. The car arrived with Adam, and stayed with him.

"I might as well never have brought it," he said reproachfully. "You've only been out with me twice!"

"You aren't going to pretend you brought it for my benefit."

"It's useful for other jobs," he admitted, "but its primary use is to take you out."

Her eyes ran him over with vast pleasure. She forgot her coming lack of purpose.

"That beautiful white suit is not fit for motoring."

"It's not motoring that I propose. It's only a spin!"

"It would be the essence of laziness on my part."

"It would be the acme of kindness."

"What about work?"

"That's done."

"Honour bright?"

He nodded and rose.

"How long will you be, Madre?"

"Five minutes."

He went out with another nod of approval.

"I daresay, if he were my own boy, he would not want to take me out with him," she thought to herself as she went upstairs to dress, but in her heart she knew that he would—that the son who would never be hers would have treated her in all respects as these boys treated her, as the dear comrade and desired companion of their leisure hours.

She kept Adam waiting a few minutes while she went into Veronica's room to make some trifling arrangement with the blinds that might well have been left to the servants. She stayed a moment more than was necessary even, straightening some things on the toilet table, and refused to hurry her steps, even when Adam's new horn tootled outside.

"We'll go to Monckton Farley," he said as he tucked her in and adjusted the dust screen.

To Monckton Farley they went by way of Combe Down and down into the Avon Valley. Felicity talked of cars, horses and cricket as one who knows no more absorbing topic of conversation. When they crossed the river and were running along the main road that skirted the steep side of the valley, Adam slackened the pace.

"Let's get out and climb up and find some air," he suggested persuasively. Felicity looked up the steep hillside. She had often climbed it, but never with Eve. It would be good fun. In some dim recesses of her mind she welcomed the thought as a challenge to the insidious languor of the earlier part of the afternoon, as a chance to prove that ability and will were one with her energy, after all.

Adam ran the car to the side of the road and then busied himself with the mechanism.

"No one can run off with her now," he said. "Are *you* sure it won't be too much for you, Madre?"

She was already on the top of the high bank and looked back at him with scorn.

"Don't insult me, Eve!"

"Oh, well; it's no child's play, but it's awfully good to get a climb sometimes."

They followed a little beaten track that led through the fringe of beech trees and so out on to the boulder-strewn ground above. Higher up sharp headlands jutted out in precipitous manner from the backbone of the ridge—flying buttresses of nature's own making. There was no disputing the steepness of the climb, once they had left the path. Felicity took the slope easily. She was in complete sympathy with Adam's wish to get through the shadowy lower slopes on to the sun-blistered heights above. She walked with a firm, vigorous step and rejected with a smile Adam's occasional offers of help. They wasted no breath in talking and at the first halt neither of them showed signs of distress. Adam gave her a look of keen approval. He was accustomed to take it for granted that Madre could do very nearly the same things as he could do and enjoy doing them, but to-day it did occur to him that Miss Forrester would never have faced the climb—nor would his mother. He acknowledged to Felicity with half a smile that he would like to see his mother tackle the hill, but he did not mention Miss Forrester. The faintest possible shadow crossed Felicity's face as she agreed it would be too much for Mrs. Preston.

A look between them had decided their goal to be a little grassy slope below a big projection of rock which stuck out like a bare shoulder from the earth, with smooth worn sides, some twenty feet high. The grassy lawn that lay at its foot was sweet with wild thyme and milkwort.

"What a ripping view!" said Adam as he flung himself down on the soft turf, tossing off his hat. He

was a little heated and on the whole showed more signs of the climb than she did. She claimed her superiority with pride and picked a little bunch of thyme for his buttonhole as compensation.

She was still aware of a faint sense of compunction which the mention of his mother had aroused.

"What will you do if I fail, Madre?" he asked, turning on his elbow to look at her.

"You are not going to fail," she assured him calmly.

"I'm no use at all at exams," he grumbled. "All I know gets locked up in my mind directly the beastly papers appear."

He tossed some bits of grass at her.

"I'm not sure I want to pass now. The army's all right if there was any chance of active service, but there isn't."

"Cheer up. One never knows! And isn't it rather late in the day to alter your mind?"

"It's the exams," he admitted frankly. "I don't want to stick in a cavalry regiment doing nothing all my life and if one wants to do anything else it's exams, exams, exams, for all existence!"

"Hill climbing!"

"Mental gymnastics! I hate it!"

She turned to him suddenly.

"You have to pass, Eve," she said firmly. "It's your career. You are cut out for a soldier. Heaps of men who go up aren't and it wouldn't matter if they failed, but with you it does. What's come over you? You are not to disappoint me!"

"I had thought perhaps on the whole I had better fail," he answered gloomily.

She took him to task seriously and in ten minutes brought him to the point of determination to "do" the examiners or die! Also to the resolve to specialise directly he was in the army.

It was not the first time she had encountered and

worsted an attack of nerves in minds that would have strenuously denied the existence of such weaknesses.

Then they ceased to talk "shop" and climbed higher. This time it was Felicity who was in front. Eve stopped to ferret out a small snake that had taken refuge in a cranny. Felicity was directly above him, leaning against a small boulder. Further down the hill on the turf where they had first rested was Eve's hat and below that—far below—was a disused quarry breaking the line of fringing beechwoods. Felicity's glances wandered between the distant view and Eve's movements.

What a dear boy he was! He wanted handling properly, of course. She loved his frank inability to deal with anything more than the difficulties of a physical world, his clear-cut theories of life, his activities and the astonishing grace of youth. Mrs. Preston was a lucky woman. Felicity wondered if she properly appreciated her "luck." She had seen her photograph. A small stout comfortable old lady with a placid, sleepy face. Preston père she had met. He was also stout but not placid. He might have been good looking once but never like Eve! Eve must be a "hark-back" to a dim distant line of ancestors, virile fighting men! He was almost akin to Dominic! Here her thoughts drifted and had to be caught back with firm insistence. There was really no likeness between Dominic and Eve at all, or a very superficial one.

One point of difference was that she would have hated showing she was tired in Eve's presence, and she would not have minded a bit owning a weakness to Dominic.

Eve was still hunting for the snake. She moved her position slightly, and doing so felt the stone against which she leant rock slightly. It rocked more than slightly. Its centre of gravity seemed to be

shifting. Quick as thought she braced herself against it, digging her heels into the slippery turf, and called,

"Eve! Eve! Get away to the left quickly! This stone's slipping!"

He looked up, only half hearing her oddly strained voice, and understanding nothing of her call.

"I've got it, Madre, in the hole here; such a beauty!" he shouted.

"Get to the left—the left. It will fall if I move!"

He heard that and sprang towards her but directly up in line with her.

"To the left!" she called again, but not very loudly.

She was exerting every ounce of strength to retard the slipping stone till he was safely out of the necessary route. It had not actually started, but she knew when her retaining hold was moved that go it must. If her foot slipped now on the turf it would go over her; if she let go too soon it would fall on him. She saw him racing up to her, still not understanding, and dared not waste strength on another call, though the strain was breaking her. Then he saw, sprang to her and caught her away. The stone, freed from the one thing that saved its balance, rocked, slipped, and plunged headlong down the slope.

Happily no other big boulder stood directly in its path. It bounded on over the spot where Eve had hunted for his snake, over the spot where his hat had rested, annihilated it, and rushed on, leaving a trail of scarred turf and slipping stones behind, right to the lip of the old quarry, over which it plunged with a splintering crash, and the rushing stream of stones plunged after it. The echo of the fall died away and the beautiful still of the summer day had it all its own way again.

The two stood still, leaning against the side of a solid piece of cliff, Eve still holding Felicity. He was

aghast at the real peril from which he had caught her, but she was staring fixedly at the ground with her hands clasped against her breast. At last he released her.

"No one hurt! But it was rather a near shave. It wasn't a very big stone after all. Did you ever hear of one slipping before? What a crash!" Felicity made a great effort.

"I think," she said with great slowness, calculated to disguise the unsteadiness of her voice, "that I'll lie down and get my breath a bit!"

"You aren't hurt, are you?" he interposed sharply.

"No, only I think I'll—rest!"

She sat down on the grass with her back against the cliff and clasped her hand on her knees, smiling at him.

Eve looked at her with worried perplexity. The sequence of events had been so rapid that he had hardly taken in what had occurred. Now he began to realise that Madre had been subject to some big physical effort. Her breath still came jerkily, and there was an odd look in her face. His eyes travelled along the scarred track down the hillside and at last it dawned on him that he had been directly in that track. Lower down still the remains of his hat were caught on a bush.

"You saved me from rather a smash, Madre," he said fiercely.

She gave a little laugh and stopped it, with her hands caught at her heart again.

"What a fierce accusation! But boulders, even that size, are heavier than one would think. My arms ache a bit. I really think I will lie down."

He slipped off his coat and folded it into a pillow, and she lay down with a pretty little apology for her silliness.

"Go and play," she insisted. "I shall be all right

directly. Go and climb up that rock and see if the view is worth seeing from there."

He obeyed because he gathered she would rather be alone, but he did not look at the view. He cleared the clefts of the rock of moss in rather a savage manner.

Felicity lay very still and looked at the sky. Her brain seemed to work spasmodically. For a few minutes she was peacefully aware of blue space and the sweetness of earth and then came a state of laboured strength, of chaos and discomfort; these two states alternated at irregular intervals.

"Madre!"

She sat up and looked round.

"I'm up here," said Eve from the summit of the rock on which he lay. "Are you all right now?"

"Yes. We'd better be getting back."

He reappeared by her side in a marvellously quick way; looked at her sharply and shamefacedly and then averted his face.

"There's no hurry. It's jolly here. Let's stay longer."

"Well, take your coat."

"I don't want it. Doesn't the sky look fine when one's lying down?"

She lay back again to see it with a little tender smile at his naïve anxiety. He turned on his face and began plucking at the thyme and milkwort.

"You are a brick, Madre. I have been thinking about it."

"Then change your thoughts. Aren't you anxious about your car?"

"No." He took a little fitment out of his pocket and fingered it.

Felicity said firmly they must return.

They went down slowly. Once moving she went *on without* hurry. She did not talk much and she

did not reject the proffered help in difficult places; also, she did not jump off the bank when they reached the road.

When they were in the car and at point of starting she said with a certain shyness:

"There's no occasion to say anything about that stupid stone. It's a thing that might only happen once in fifty years, and it might make people nervous of going there."

"Just as you like, of course," he answered, knitting his brows. "But don't invent silly reasons, Madre. Are you sure you are not hurt?"

"I'm all right. But you know how silly people are."

Eve knew very well. He was in complete sympathy with Madre there!

He insisted at stopping at Bathampton for tea in spite of the lateness of the hour. Madre was loath to leave the car so he brought tea out to her. It was past seven when they reached home, and Bessington and Veronica were on the terrace waiting. As they drove up Veronica called out cheerfully,

"Had tea, Madre?"

On hearing she had, Veronica turned triumphantly to Bessington.

"You see there was no need to bother. The kettle's been kept boiling for nothing!"

"It might have been wanted," he insisted.

Madre seemed very content to take Bessington's chair and sit with them, listening to what they had to tell. She did not even seem greatly concerned that Eve was late for work and would probably receive a reprimand. She found nothing to say of her own doings beyond the fact she had been for a nice run in a little car.

CHAPTER IV

"It Is a Poor Achievement That Does not Bring Content in Its Train."

I

It was not till September that Dominic made up his mind to put his fortune to the touch. He had already established the right and custom of direct correspondence with the Haven, and more particularly with Veronica. For Felicity always found some good reason why Veronica rather than herself should answer such letters as Bessington sent her, and in this way the girl, almost without realising it, slipped into more or less regular correspondence with him. She made no comment thereon, and generally handed his letters to her mother to read. In fact, she betrayed by no sign or word anything more than general pleasure at his friendly attitude. Felicity was only half satisfied. It was impossible to suspect Veronica of duplicity, yet on occasions Felicity caught her daughter regarding her with an affectionate air of secret amusement that was disconcerting. Felicity suggested wintering abroad, and Veronica offered no objection. Nevertheless the proposal fell into oblivion.

Then one Friday morning Veronica, who was reading a letter from Bessington, announced that he was coming down to Priest's Park for the week end. The last two visits had been paid to the Haven direct.

Felicity, who was buttering a piece of toast, put it

down untasted and looked out of the window. Veronica repeated her news and her mother expressed her pleasure, but added that there was no one at the College but her brother and Professor Symons and that he might find it dull.

"Shall we wire to Eve to come too?" suggested Veronica, with sudden laughter in her eyes.

She was a little taken aback by the eager look in her mother's face.

"I wonder would he come?" she murmured. "It's his last Sunday before Sandhurst."

Eve had passed his exam quite creditably.

"It is quite possible he might if you want him," returned Veronica.

"Why should I want him, you silly child?"

She pulled Veronica nearer her and rearranged her tie. Veronica submitted with the same little tolerant smile of amusement.

"You and Eve both look your best in white," remarked her mother.

"Cream, not white! Wouldn't you love Eve in a beautiful cream and gold uniform? Madre? Shall I wire to him?"

"Why do you want him?"

"I don't want him. It's you who do." Then she broke into a laugh. "Oh, Madre, you dear, as if I did not know you liked Eve every bit as much as you like me!"

"Veronica!" Felicity's face was stricken.

Veronica stroked it with her cool little hand. She was not given to caresses, so it was doubly dear.

"Well, nearly as much—next best! Oh, I'm not jealous!"

"I don't want Eve."

"Very well; don't complain if Dominic wants to spend all to-morrow on the river or playing tennis. If he's no one else to play with, he will expect me to

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look after him, and unless you change the lazy ways you have got into lately you will be left alone."

Felicity said meekly she would chance that. And then to show she was not so lazy as Veronica hinted, proposed walking down to the tennis court with her where Veronica had to play off some ties in the local tournament.

"You ought to be playing yourself," grumbled Veronica. "It's the first season you've missed."

"I seem to have been extra busy," said Felicity hastily.

They started to walk down through the woods together, but half-way down Felicity recollected some neglected duty and said she must return.

Veronica went on reluctantly. She was never given to worrying, but lately she had felt a little uneasy about her mother. She was quite definitely glad that Dominic was coming. She would say nothing to him, but she was convinced that if anything was wrong with Madre he would notice it and the responsibility would not then rest with her. Her anxiety was not enough to influence her play.

Meanwhile Felicity, having watched her daughter out of sight, turned and went very slowly up the hill again. There were three or four seats on the way and at the first she came to she sat down, apparently forgetful of the suddenly remembered duty.

There was very little air and the woods were still with that stillness that is the birthright of September. A small red squirrel came and peeped at her from behind a tree opposite. Felicity loved the woods, she spent many happy idle hours there, but she had never noticed till to-day how airless they were and how steep the path that led homeward. She continued to sit still there, though her mind urged her uneasily to move. She could not think what it was she wanted *to do, but* she had no wish to be idle.

Dominic Bessington was coming with the full intent of putting his fortune to the touch! She was sure of it. Presumably he knew his chances better than she did, for she knew nothing. She was suddenly and terribly aware that she knew nothing of the real intent and thought of the child, who had been her closest companion for eighteen years. Yet Veronica was candid and open as day. How had she failed her daughter, or was her mental eyesight better adapted for the masculine page?

She had heard herself from Eve, that morning, and would have told Veronica but for her teasing speech.

In some inexplicable way her soul was groping after the boy as if with him lay the refuge from many things.

Dominic's eyes were too discerning. He would see, she was sure, that she was "tired"; would be awake to the hundred little subterfuges that Veronica missed. No doubt it was all only a question of "being a little tired" and taking things easily for a time. There was not anything actually the matter with her. They would winter at Darvos Platz. Felicity thought with pleasure of the invigorating air.

Later on, when Dominic and Veronica were married, she would make that trip to the far side of the Black Sea. It had always fascinated her. Then sharply she recollected that if Veronica should refuse Dominic he would not come again. There would be no more week-end visits. The odd sense of un-ease that gripped her was distressing. So she rejected that thought with an effort of will. It was not so well worth entertaining as that Black Sea expedition.

When she eventually returned to the house she despatched a wire to Adam.

II

Bessington arrived by the five o'clock train on Saturday and he walked up. He had indicated as much to Veronica in his letter. It was therefore no matter of surprise that she happened to be strolling down the woods as he came up. Veronica said frankly she had come to meet him.

"Eve's here," she announced. "Madre thought it would be so dull for you with only Uncle Fafner and the Professor at the College."

She looked straight before her as she made the statement.

"I shall be charmed to see Eve. Let's stop here a bit. There's no hurry."

They had reached the edge of a precipitous slope, where the beech tree roots, running far and wide, held the bank together in their twisted fingers and the branches themselves swept down to the mossy ground. One could see the water in the little lake below and the grey towers of the Abbey showed through a filmy mist of heat.

Veronica was quite ready to stop. She was in no hurry at all. She leant her arms on a swinging bough and rocked gently to and fro. Her eyes were thoughtful and shining. She was immensely happy, and confident of life, and it would have taken a more disinterested man than Dominic to guess that she was holding well in hand a delicious sense of strange well-being.

"I did not come down just for amusement this time," began Dominic.

He had prepared several speeches and one of them began like this, but he knew he was saying it far too soon.

She nodded comprehensively.

"Perhaps you wanted to see how I was looking after Madre?"

She turned her half-averted face a little more towards him.

"No!" he had forgotten how the speech went on. There was a singing in his ears. He had seized the most inopportune moment. Nevertheless he plunged on into his adventure.

"I came to—to ask you to marry me," he blurted out confusedly.

She still waited.

"You know, I think you must know, that I love you, dear," he hurried on now. "I haven't said so, but I think you must know."

She turned completely towards him, her eyes shining and smiling, and full of a confiding candour that set him trembling.

"Yes, I know, of course!—You and Madre! You two adorable darlings. You both let me know!"

The little break in her voice was midway between tears and laughter.

"And you?—Can you?—Am I too soon? Veronica, you *must* care for me!"

He caught hold of the bough on which she rested and drew nearer her. His diffidence passed from him. He was urgent, even fierce in his demand.

"You must try to care, for I cannot do without you, Veronica. You are the other half of me, I am sure of it. So sure that I *must* be able to make you care!"

On top of the sharp fear, born of her silence, there slipped her caressing little voice, so much calmer, so comforting, and cool to his heart.

"Of course I care! Should I be here else, or would you be here? Dominic, you are a dear old stupid—of course I want to marry you as much as you want to marry me!"

He put his arms round her then and held her.

"Not so much as that—but I shall teach you."

She leant back her head and her smiling shining eyes looked straight into his.

"But I *am* taught, I couldn't want more. And you couldn't *make* me love you, because I do that without making!"

Dominic kissed her.

III

When they reached the Haven it had apparently escaped Bessington's memory that he was Mr. Fraser's guest and not Mrs. Crofton's. It was Veronica who reminded him of the fact, but he insisted he must see Madre without loss of time.

Felicity had just absently acquiesced to Eve's statement that either Bessington's train was outrageously late or that he and Veronica were playing truants. She had herself proposed a walk with Eve, but when ready had lingered restlessly in the garden. She heard the click of the gate as the two entered, but though she had her back to it, she did not turn. It was Eve who announced their arrival.

When Felicity did turn she still did not go to meet them, but remained near the terrace wall, struggling with the inordinate sense of fatigue that had overcome her. As they came nearer she heard Eve say half under his breath:

"Hullo, something's up!"

She looked at Bessington first. Then at Veronica, who held his hand and stood before her with a pretty air of confident happiness.

"Well, Madre, are you content?"

It was Veronica who spoke. Eve slipped quietly indoors.

Her gaze ranged from one to the other. It was glad. It was wistful. It was satisfied.

"If you are both of you as content as I am, there will be enough of happiness for you," she said softly.

Then with a little hurried catch in her voice she added,

"And so—I think—if you don't mind—I will go for my walk with Eve just the same."

She kissed Veronica quickly and went after Eve. She had not spoken to Bessington, only touched his hand and that and her look had been enough to seal his content. Two minutes later they saw her and Eve go out by the north gate. They had neither spoken till now.

"I shouldn't have liked you half so much, Dominic," said Veronica, "if you hadn't liked Madre so much."

Bessington assured her that if her liking of him depended on that, she could continue to like him in the most conscientious manner.

IV

Felicity had stipulated for a year's engagement, but circumstances and Veronica's own wish lengthened this time by six months. Veronica found it very pleasant being engaged, and as she wisely said, "If they were going to spend the rest of their lives being married, there could be no valid objection to spending eighteen months being engaged, since that could not occur again." Dominic submitted patiently. He complained a little to Madre, but she refused to press Veronica and on the whole he too had to admit it was a pleasant time. He spent most of his week ends at Priest's Park, and Felicity for their sakes renounced travelling for the first winter. She decided to let or sell her various little "pieds-a-terre," saying she

would put up with hotels now she would not have Veronica to consider. She planned future travels to Japan, Russia and the Black Sea, and never by as much as a sign betrayed any fear of the loneliness that shadowed her future days.

"I believe that Madre will be quite glad to be quit of me," laughed Veronica one day.

"Would you feel quite so content, if you thought she would miss you dreadfully?"

"Of course not. I don't want her to miss me. It would spoil everything. I'm not complaining, I'm only stating facts."

"Madre studies facts too," he suggested.

She nodded.

"Facts are worth studying when they make one contented."

"Is contentment the main object of life?"

"It is with Madre."

"With you certainly."

"Madre brought me up."

"The value of your philosophy depends on the definition of content."

"That sounds like Euclid and I never learnt it."

Her method of disposing of implied criticism always amused Bessington. He never seriously criticised her in the sense of weighing her merits or demerits. He wanted nothing changed. The sum total of her made for him Veronica and if he at times enjoyed holding her as it were at mental arm's length to view, it was chiefly because she was in general too near him for perfectly *conscious* approval.

V

It was the second November after Veronica's engagement that Adam Preston lost both his parents

within a fortnight of each other. He had not long received his commission which gave him the poor consolation of knowing that his father had seen his dearest ambition fulfilled before he died.

"It's all beastly hard luck," he wrote to Madre who was then in Italy. "I am a big sight too well off for my regiment, though I'm not going to fling it up, or settle down at 'Pavens.' *They* wouldn't have liked that, so I am letting the house furnished."

He wrote fully to her of the material concerns of his changed lot, but said little of his feelings, and in spite of Madre's entreaties, refused to join them in Switzerland at Christmas. In some odd way he entertained the idea that it savoured of disloyalty to his dead mother, to seek immediate consolation with Madre.

Possibly Madre understood or shared this feeling, for she ceased to press him, though her heart ached to be near him. They returned home, however, in the beginning of February instead of the end of March, as they had intended. They stayed then in London and devoted themselves to the business of the trousseau. Adam came to them readily enough then, and was thankful for Madre's quiet acceptance of the situation. She did everything in her power to fill the gap made in his life, and in a short time, by her presence and her letters, provided him with all the sense of home life which he needed, though he would most certainly have denied its necessity to his existence. Felicity, with her usual steady refusal to face self-analyses when she held it undesirable, told herself that it was all for Adam's good that she strengthened the tie between them by all means in her power. The most that she would admit to herself beyond that was that as she was to lose Veronica, it was fortunate for her that she had a decent excuse to "mother" Adam, who at least showed no inclination to marry. He

was at present too young and in any case not likely to fall a prey to designing mammas, even when a few years older.

If she had one complaint to make against him, it was that his demands on her were too few. Still his visits were frequent and she was at least sure he made no greater demands on any one else. What she hardly noticed was that his visits coincidented very neatly with such time as Dominic's demands on Veronica could not be set aside. There were limits at Felicity's instinctive reasoning. It did not extend into the region of Dominic Bessington's possibilities.

VI

"Guess whom I met in Grafton Street to-day!" cried Veronica, coming into the sitting-room at the Westminster Palace Hotel.

Then she saw Adam was present and altered her words.

"Madre sha'n't guess now, because I want to know straightaway, Eve, why you didn't tell us Stella Forrester was at the Tankards' house party?"

"Didn't I mention it?" said Adam unconcernedly. "I suppose I forgot. Are you accusing me of a crime?"

"Not if you really forgot. It was Stella I met. She is up in town to meet Mark."

"Mark?"

They were both astonished.

"Yes, he has come over on private business. Lord Lugan only came as far as Cairo and Mark is to join him there quite soon. The Forresters only got a wire yesterday telling them to come up to town."

"Where are they staying?" asked Felicity.

Veronica's eyes watched Adam's face as she answered,

"At some tiny hotel in Bloomsbury. The—the—" she hesitated still, looking at Adam as if he could help her out.

"Why Bloomsbury?" he asked, so naturally that she acquitted him of more knowledge.

"Because it's cheap, of course—comparatively. It's the Habberton—Duke Street. Mrs. Forrester hasn't been out of Pieceminster for fourteen years and never in a motor in her life, so Stella is having a glorious time!"

"We might call this afternoon," said Felicity, half turning to Adam.

"I shouldn't," interposed Veronica swiftly. "Wait till Mark's here. He's to arrive to-morrow."

"You were coming to buy those curtains my tenant wants," said Adam reproachfully.

"So I was. And you, Veronica?"

"Dominic and I are going hunting for those etchings for the dining-room." The little cloud of uneasiness that had touched her had melted away, but she told Dominic about it when they started on their hunt.

"Stella laid so much stress on the fact that Adam was there, that it seemed odd he had said nothing about her. But I suppose that was just Stella!"

"Don't be uncharitable. It was 'just Adam' also. He would see no reason for mentioning it, even if it had been of importance to him. Adam's not expansive over his own affairs."

"Not to the world—but to Madre, surely!"

"Not even to Madre," returned Dominic firmly. "He's not in the least secretive, but he fails to take into account what interests others."

Veronica dismissed the subject. Her interest was at present confined to the pictures they were seeking for the dining-room of the house that they had taken in Hampstead.

VII

Mark did not wait for Felicity to call. Hearing that the Croftons were in London he came round to see them the first evening. He told them his visit to England might be the matter of a week or a month. In any case he was to join his chief in Cairo directly it was finished. They saw a great deal of each other in the following days. Mrs. Forrester soon returned to Pieceminster—by Mark's orders. He himself took her down, which compensated her for leaving Stella with the Croftons.

Mark made the most of his time, monopolising Madre as completely as he could, so that Adam, who seemed to have a great deal of time on hand just now, was flung into Stella's company and seemed quite content.

It took Mark three days to appreciate the extent of Adam's leisure. Having appreciated it, he transferred most of his attention from Madre to Adam himself, and at the end of a week said he thought his mother had been long enough alone and that Stella must return. Stella protested fiercely in private, but publicly submitted without complaint. She thanked Mrs. Crofton with pathetic earnestness for her kindness, and departed under her brother's escort.

VIII

Veronica was married at the end of March at St. Margaret's, Westminster. Neither she nor her mother wasted efforts trying to be original over her wedding. Veronica said that as every one made that attempt, it would be more singular to be commonplace, and since *so many peop*le were married, weddings could not be

considered original in any case! Perhaps the most singular thing about the ceremony itself was the number of guests under the age of twenty-five. Felicity's godchildren alone were a goodly array and the Priest's Park contingent, new and old, was no inconsiderable item.

Felicity had declined to take an active part in the furnishing of the new house. She insisted that both Dominic and Veronica were quite competent to deal with their own affairs, and certainly it was an affair that kept Veronica busy. Mark's presence in London was a great boon to Felicity therefore. Either he or Adam seemed in constant attendance on her, and Veronica less and less. Perhaps she preferred that the loosening of the tie between herself and her daughter should be of a voluntary rather than an obligatory nature. Her cheerful spirits never seemed to fail, but those friends who would see her had to come to her. She made the excellent excuse that she really could not wear herself out paying calls at such a time, and indeed she might have run about London for a month on end without exhausting possibilities.

"Fancy Madre ever being tired out!" laughed one of her godchildren, hearing this.

"After all, she is not so young as she was," retorted the mother who had read out the reason for a refusal to accept an invitation to a luncheon party.

"She isn't! She's never any different!" declared all the younger members of the party in chorus.

"She doesn't waste her energies on absurdities," contributed Mr. Meredith. "And, by the way, some of you had better settle what we are to give Veronica for a wedding present."

IX

Every one had gone and Felicity and Mark were alone in her private sitting-room, where the only trace of the event was Veronica's bouquet in a glass vase on the table.

Felicity lay back in a deep chair, silent and still. Mark sat opposite. He was leaving England that night, having just succeeded in making his affairs last over the actual day of the wedding. He was with Felicity now at her request. Adam was busy helping the principal bridesmaid and Stella, to watch the re-packing of the presents.

Dusk had fallen, but the curtains were still unclosed, and outside the street lamps looked like lost jewels in the clean spring twilight. The kaleidoscope of Parliament Square worked out its ever changing pattern, remote and dim, the room was very quiet, and the fire flickered pleasantly.

Mark broke the silence.

"Madre," he said abruptly, "don't let Adam make a fool of himself over Stella. They are not in the least suited to each other—— Besides, I should hate it."

Felicity, who had brought Mark up here as a refuge against the tide of tugging thoughts and memories, looked up in amazement.

"Stella and Adam? But Adam is much too young! He doesn't care about girls seriously. He's not the sort."

"No, but Stella is. I mean, I think she likes him—But it would be out of the question. Perhaps I'm worrying for nothing, but I have to be away and Stella has really no one to look after her. My mother doesn't understand her in the least. It makes me as fussy as an old woman, doesn't it? Anyhow, it's all *right, now* I've mentioned it to you."

He hurried the subject into oblivion and asked her if she would not come out to India, but she owned frankly that India did not "call her." Too many English, was how she put it. "One can't absorb the atmosphere of a new country surrounded by one's fellow country men and women!"

They fell to talking of their country women out there. Mark had made his first essay in romance and for the first time he told her about it. She listened sympathetically and wondered what the other woman was really like. Mark, too, was young; was of the age that seeks incessantly and instinctively some immortal salve against the desolate days that Time holds up for those lonely ones who fail to find it. He would write and tell her all about it now. Tell her of the ups and downs of his search, of its torments and sharp pleasure, and when it was over and he had found his salve, he would write no more, for he would have no need. He was glad and thankful to linger out these last minutes of his time here with her in the dusk, but all the same he was going back to the real "her." He was not going into the great loneliness again!

Mark said good-bye, when the need came, quickly and kissed her hand in his odd way. She fathomed the unspoken sympathy he had for her and was grateful when he said that Stella should not come up to say good-bye as Madre was obviously tired and should rest. She called him back as he was going to bid him write to her and tell all about his other friend.

She was all alone now, sitting in the darkness, counting and recounting the moving lights outside. The tearing tide was pulling the anchor of her thoughts out to sea. One half of her cried out to drift away with it, the other for help and new anchorage. For some one to hold her back. For there was black tex-

ror hidden in that misty sea, and dangers she would not face. She *must* find a safe and sure harbour again. Had she not been out to that sea and found it a desolate waste of waters? It was nothing to her that others found it a fairy sea and a high road to unimagined joys.

She wanted Adam, wanted him desperately, clutching at the thought of his presence as at salvation and yet lacking resolution to send for him. Then he came —came in quietly, asked if she would like a light, was content to sit in darkness, that being her whim, replenished the fire, said it had been rather a jolly wedding, not so stupid as most, and that the last bridesmaid had gone and he was glad there wasn't a party to dinner, only themselves and Fafner.

She turned her face towards him in the darkness and answered softly at need and at length bade him give her light.

As he pulled the curtains (he was careful not to call a waiter just yet), he said casually,

"I've got a few days leave to run down to Devon about that farm property. I suppose you wouldn't care to come and help me settle whether I sell or keep?"

Here was good anchorage; she clutched at it. Slowly the tide turned. The sucking waters still lapped round her, but her mind ceased to answer their call.

It was content to discuss the question of Devon pasturage and the question of buying or selling. She knew in her heart of hearts that Adam needed no advice to help him determine his own actions, but she could at least pretend he wanted her company.

In this way she gained some hours respite, and the little quiet dinner with Adam and her brother was a cheerful one. Mr. Fraser told Adam afterwards that he was much relieved at the way his sister was taking *the loss* of Veronica.

"That Devon idea of yours is excellent," he said. "It was a kind thought."

Adam replied uncomfortably that it was really very boring going down alone. He had tried it and there was no one else he could ask.

That night the tide had it all its own way with Felicity and she drifted in the darkness out to that drowning waste of waters, and when through the darkness a form bent down to save her and she stretched out her hands to it, she saw it was Dominic, and straightway called for Adam! Adam! But Adam made no answer, and in straining to hear his voice she awoke in the cold dawn.

CHAPTER V

"Stella"

I

JANE, having cleared breakfast, shook out the faded tablecloth and replaced it. She did not put it on evenly because to do so would be to bring a big stain into a prominent place, so it was allowed to hang down more on one side than the other. Stella stood in the window and watched her with sombre discontent. When she had gone she looked round the shabby room and the discontent deepened.

"We could do with a new tablecloth," she said suddenly, so suddenly that Mrs. Forrester quite jumped. She was knitting as usual.

"My dear child, you made me drop a stitch!"

She looked at the tablecloth also.

"I think it ought to do a little longer," she said with an anxious note in her voice. "I should like to have a new one when Mark is coming home! If we get one now it will not look fresh."

Stella flung down the duster she held and stamped her foot.

"Probably it would be worn out by then. Mark won't be in a hurry to take leave! If we are never to have anything new or decent in the house till he does, we shall live in rags. Isn't any one but Mark entitled to see pretty or even clean things? Except when he's at home the house isn't fit to live in. He doesn't know

the horrible shabbiness of it all or that it's only when he's home we take the covers off the chairs and have curtains that haven't holes and decent table covers—oh, I'm sick to death of it!"

Mrs. Forrester looked shocked and frightened. She put out her shaking hand with a deprecating air.

"But Stella, my darling, that's why the things have lasted so long—are so good still! How should I buy any new things if these wore out? One has to be careful with our means—and Mark—"

"Mark doesn't take any money from you. He told me so," objected Stella swiftly. "You haven't his education to pay now, and we've three hundred a year. We ought to have ordinary decency."

Mrs. Forrester began to cry.

"That any one—and my own daughter—should call my house indecent—I am sure we have lovely things!"

"Locked away!" flashed out Stella remorselessly, unmoved by the old woman's tears. "Piles of things! —that's the wretchedness of it—there's that Indian shawl—"

Mrs. Forrester nearly shrieked.

"What, use *that?* For every day? With the sun on it, and the gravy and Jane? Stella, you must be out of your mind!"

Her hand clutched the little basket of keys beside her as if she feared a raid on her hoard that very moment.

"I suppose you are keeping it for Mark's children instead of your own!" The bitterness of years welled up in her voice.

"Stella, how can you be so indelicate, and Mark not married!"

Stella turned suddenly and left the room and silence fell on the shabby apartment.

Mrs. Forrester wiped her eyes and renewed her knitting, with occasional furtive glances at the door.

There was something furtive and cautious about her every movement. She even knitted as if she would rather conceal than not the implements in her hands. Presently she laid her needles down and listened attentively. The front door shut with a bang and immediately after the gate clicked. Stella had gone out, oblivious of the dusting still undone. Mrs. Forrester rose very quietly and going to the table examined the cloth carefully. It was a chenille cloth, much faded and stained, with at least three cleaners' marks still in evidence. The edge was torn and had been roughly mended.

"There are no holes," said Mrs. Forrester to herself. "I can't see why Stella—of course, we wouldn't like a man to see it, but——"

She stood upright, fingering it and thinking.

"There's the purple cloth. I meant to give it to Stella when she married but she won't marry now, and if she preferred to use it——"

She looked round the room again and out of the window.

In the same furtive manner she took a key from the little basket that never left her side and unlocked a deep drawer in the old mahogany bureau. Even when unlocked, she hesitated to pull it open till she had again made sure there was no one in the garden to observe her.

The contents of the drawer were covered with blue tissue paper which, removed, revealed a collection of shawls, covers, tapestries, and eastern embroideries that would have transformed the shabby room into a domain of rich harmonies. Mrs. Forrester turned them over with fond hands and gloating eyes. They were all either of sufficient age to enhance their actual value or of a new freshness that had never been toned by daylight. On the top lay the heavy purple cloth *with the* embroidered corners that was used when

Mark was at home. There were embroidered cushion covers that slipped on over the faded ones now in evidence, an Afghan rug which Mark always connected with the sofa—other things, besides dainty table linen, cobwebby doylies, beautiful scarves. Mrs. Forrester turned them over, shaking her head. Finally she unearthed a soft terra-cotta cover that bore the hallmark of Liberty's. It was just a little faded "shop-window soiled." She had bought it as a great bargain many years before. She drew it out with quicker fingers than one would have credited to her usual movements and spread it on the table. It certainly gave a different aspect to the room and went well enough with the plain painted walls which so revolted Stella's colour-loving soul. Mrs. Forrester replaced the fern pot in the centre of the table, closed the drawer without locking it, and sitting down resumed her knitting with one eye on the table, so to speak.

A big sleepy cat which had been dozing contently on the sofa, chose to awake, and arching his back with voluptuous enjoyment of moving muscles sniffed at something new in the room. It must be investigated and with a slow deliberate spring he jumped on the table.

Mrs. Forrester's knitting fell to the ground and she jumped up with a little shriek.

"Haffy, Haffy, get down! Oh, you dreadful creature! You'll put your claws into it!"

She caught the cat about its middle and deposited him outside the door with startling rapidity. Then she turned to the table, and shaking her head, and pursing her lips, removed the new table cover, folded it carefully, and replaced it in the drawer which she now locked.

"It would never do! I can't see there is anything very bad in the old cloth," said Mrs. Forrester to herself. "Stella has such extravagant ideas! There

would be nothing for them when I died if I listened to her."

Meanwhile Stella, oblivious of household duties, had gone out. She did not turn townward, but westward towards the railway by the Walk. This was the new short cut to the station which, with its gravelled way, its lamps and seats, had been the objective of a bitter newspaper war some two years ago. It was usually deserted except just at train times when the instigators and promoters of the innovation made a point of using it, and remarked on its convenient shortness to the station, while its opponents stuck to the old muddy road and declared they saved a minute and a half by so doing.

Stella sat down on a seat and took a letter from her pocket. She had read it before in the privacy of her bedroom and she wanted to read it again in the comparative privacy of the Walk, though there was no reason on earth why she should not have read it under her mother's very nose.

Dear Miss Forrester:

I am coming down to Pieceminster this week-end to see some hunting stables, and shall like to call and see you, if you permit, on Saturday afternoon. I hope you are well and not taking too long walks and getting knocked up. Please give my kind regards to Mrs. Forrester and believe me,

Yours sincerely,

ADAM PRESTON.

There was certainly nothing in the wording of the letter to feed the emotions or cause a heartbeat, yet Stella, sitting alone between the clipped hedges of the Walk, concocted out of it a situation and an excitement that called for the gravest deliberation on her part.

She believed Adam to be in love with her, though *he* had never said so in so many words; and she was

in love with him, though with that queer, crooked streak that warped her nature she pretended to herself that she was only in love with what he could give her! She even took herself seriously to task for contemplating a mercenary marriage; criticised herself as a mere adventuress and found some odd zest added to her dreary life by that mental gymnastic. Even with facts facing her in her favour she could not be wholly honest with herself. She had really done nothing to call Adam Preston to her side. She had seen him twice since Veronica's wedding two years ago. Once more at the Tankards', who were distant cousins of hers and remembered it once each year, and again at a big show at Aldershot, to which some good-natured neighbours had taken her. By some happy chance she had found herself lunching with Adam's regiment. On both these occasions he had signalled her out—or so she fancied—for special attention, and she took credit to herself that she had resisted an excuse to correspond.

She could now allow herself the poor reward of posing in her own eyes as the unhappy victim of a brother's harshness. For Mark had no way approved of Adam's apparent infatuation, and had told Stella so with the blunt certainty that she found so galling and he found the only effectual weapon against her ever-ready sham heroics.

Having cultivated so little the virtues of a cheerful temper it is hardly surprising that at this juncture her usual pessimism failed to picture a successful issue to Adam Preston's wooing, and since she decided it was predoomed to failure, she harvested a goodly crop of self-pity sufficient to render herself really unhappy.

There was at least reality in her unhappiness, whatever fiction might be the original cause of it.

She was now under the curious mental delusion

that it depended on her as to whether Adam should come to Pieceminster or not, that she must decide now at once whether she would "draw him on" for her own ends or obey the uncompromising "command" of her brother to "let his greatest friend alone." And Adam seemed to offer her one chance of escape from the sordid life at the Laurels.

As a matter of fact, the matter did not rest with Stella at all. Adam certainly thought of her as neither enticing nor repelling him. He merely thought she behaved with the reticence that a rather shy and lonely girl might be expected to show. It was very suitable and rather attractive. He was really coming to Pieceminster to see some hunters, and some hunting stables, and he was pleased that it gave him a chance of meeting her. If she had refused to set eyes on him, however, he would still have to come to see to his business. Adam was too much given to sitting tight on his emotions to be desperately in love yet, but it pleased him to think of Stella Forrester, and her pathetic eyes lived in his memory. He was convinced the world was a rough place for her, and it was a self-evident duty of any man to make it a little easier and pleasant for her if he could. In short, Adam was not yet fully in love, but it would require a very little push to send him over the precipice of that most deadly of all attacks—magnanimous devotion. But the push need not necessarily come from Stella herself, though she could not and did not even wish to believe this. She wanted to have a hand in moulding the really very simple outline of her future, and once her fingers concerned itself with it, its simplicity would be destroyed forever.

She desired most passionately to marry and escape her present life. Every good impulse in her pushed her towards it. But linked with her good impulses was

that natural tendency towards secrecy, towards devious ways rather than straight ones.

She told herself now that Mark would be sure to have warned her mother not to encourage Adam, and that if she told her mother now of Adam's intended visit, Mrs. Forrester, to whom Mark's slightest wish was law, would find means to prevent their meeting, even if he called at the shabby little house. True, he had stayed there with Mark when the shabbiness was disguised, and the dull rooms blossomed with a pathetic array of treasures from the past. Her mother would never consent to put these out unless a visitor was definitely expected. If Adam came and saw the house as it was now would he ever come again, and if she warned her mother he *was* coming, would not Mrs. Forrester, mindful of Mark, employ her by no means unresourceful brains in finding ways to prevent Stella and Adam being five minutes alone together? She soon forced herself to believe that it was necessary for her to see Adam before her mother knew of his presence in Pieceminster, and she thought elaborate plans for the fulfilment of even this really simple affair, but her plans, if intricate, were well designed to her purpose and left little to chance.

II

Adam arrived at eleven on Saturday and was met by Walter Burford, the local vet., with a dog-cart, and drove out to inspect the possible purchase, which business occupied all the morning and left some further inspection for the Sunday afternoon. They drove back into Pieceminster about one o'clock, and on the bridge just outside the town, Adam suddenly told Burford to stop and he would walk the rest of the way. Burford looked round, as he went

off, and muttered to himself: "Shouldn't wonder if something more than horses brought him down here."

Now Stella had seen Adam's arrival at the station, and seen him drive off with Burford. She had happened to be in the Walk when the train arrived, and from there one could see the station exit. She knew just what horses he had gone to see, and she knew also that Mr. Burford was not at all likely to forego his free Saturday afternoon, which he devoted to golf, by allowing Adam to stay too long over his inspection. They would return about one o'clock, she reckoned, and reckoned rightly, at which hour she discovered that she had an errand at the end of High Street. She had just reached the bridge that led out of the town when Adam and Burford drove in, and, seeing her, he had stopped the dogcart and dismounted. There was no sign of all her intricate calculations visible in her rather shy and embarrassed welcome, and she turned instinctively homeward, forgetful of her errand, for her capacity for concocting plans surpassed her capability of carrying them out in detail.

Adam said he was lucky to meet her, and asked in the same breath if she had received his letter.

She nodded, looking ahead with puzzled eyes.

"You don't look well," he insisted; "and I had hoped you would be pleased to see me."

"I am; in fact, I'm extra glad to have met you. I was wondering what to do."

"Did you think I should forget to call?"

"No; but I wanted to see you first. Mr. Preston—I want——"

She stammered a little, and the eyes that met his were beseeching.

"Well, you are seeing me first. What's the matter?"

"*I can't* explain here in the street," she said hur-

riedly, "but if you wouldn't mind—wouldn't think it terrible—I—I—am going out to the Minster Field after lunch——" Her voice trailed off.

Adam knit his brows.

"I may come too?" he demanded sharply.

"Would you? I want to explain—want your advice. It's so difficult; I have no one to help me."

Adam was all concern and pity in a moment.

"Of course I'll help you. Where's the Minster Field? Can't I call for you first?"

"No, no!" she interposed quickly, and proceeded to give him the necessary information.

Adam parted from her at the corner of Roden Road, and walked back quickly to the hotel. He was hungry and rather annoyed with an indefinite some one or something which appeared to demand of him such a foolish deviation from the obvious. Probably it wasn't demanded at all; only Stella—poor little girl—wasn't able to cope with some simple predicament. In any case, there could be no harm in going for a walk with her before calling at the Laurels, as he fully meant to do.

III

"But I still don't understand," protested Adam, frowning heavily. "Why should Mrs. Forrester not want to see me? She was always very jolly to me when I stayed here before."

Stella's embarrassment was not in the least feigned this time. It was difficult to put forth any reasonable excuse for Mrs. Forrester's supposed reluctance to see any one. Moreover, she was beginning to realise that it was not so easy to lead Adam into twisted paths as she had imagined. It might even be that to insist on concealing their friendship would be to cancel it altogether, so set was Adam on storming the

position her imagination had created. She, therefore, took refuge in pure unvarnished truth, and the most calculated fictions could not have served her purpose better, for it aroused his chivalry and pity by the very simplicity it betrayed.

"Well, I don't know how to explain," she faltered, "but we aren't well off, you know—it's all so shabby —and mean—I couldn't bear——"

There were genuine tears in her eyes, for she honestly feared that the shabby influence of her surroundings might frighten him off, so dwarfed and cramped was her appreciation of character.

Adam was struck to the heart. It seemed to him little less than horrible that circumstances should have made this delicate, shy girl so aware of the cruel snobbishness of the world that she could accredit him with a taint of it. He got a little red, and stammered out an answer with eager protest.

"Oh, I say, Miss Forrester, haven't I stayed with you? And I enjoyed it ever so much! Of course, I know—Mark told me—that you are not amongst the lucky rich, but it only makes it the more splendid to think how you have made it possible for Mark to go in for what he wanted."

"It's worse than when you were here before," she murmured.

"But you oughtn't to think like that about your friends! It's not fair to them. It just shows how badly you want some one to look after you."

She was not altogether displeased at this new rôle; indeed, a few minutes later she came to believe in it, abandoning the more ambitious one of adventures for the easier one of touching simplicity.

Adam went back to tea with her at the Laurels as he had intended. Stella showed him into the drawing-room and sent Jane to light the fire while she went to warn her mother. Adam would have preferred tea

in the dining-room and no fuss, but he supposed Mrs. Forrester must be humoured. Stella had hinted with a faint sigh that her mother was old-fashioned and —difficult.

Adam called again on Sunday, and in the evening returned to town convinced that Mark's sister had a wretched life, and that Mark should be ashamed of himself for not seeing to it that she had a better. Women—especially women like Stella—ought not to be called upon to face sordid details—and Stella was delicate, he was sure.

He wrote to Stella now, and if her replies to his letters were more expansive than his communications, that fault lay rather in his general incapacity for words rather than in any lack of interest on his part. In two months he was convinced that Stella's existence depended on her escape from her surroundings. He was certain Stella was in love with him, and this without any shade of vanity on his part. He was incapable of self-analysis, so he just decided that if Stella loved him it was because he—Adam Preston—was in love with her, and had succeeded in making her care for him.

As soon as ever this was apparent to him, he sat down and wrote her a very proper and serious offer of marriage, awaited the result without great trepidation, and was—in his own language—struck all of a heap when Stella wrote a tearful protest of undying affection and farewell. Her mother had insisted on seeing the letter and decided it was out of the question.

Adam could not get away just then, and fretted with impatience at being reduced to postal attacks on the situation, which he declared should offer no difficulties whatever. He said frankly he wished Stella had left it to him to approach her mother, but that,

under the circumstances, the only thing to do was to await his first free day, when he would come down and see Mrs. Forrester himself, and meanwhile Stella had better say nothing. It would be all right. They were going to get married, and a few difficulties would only increase their happiness. He felt quite proud of that expression, feeling it bordered on the emotional.

IV

What had actually happened at the Laurels was this:

Stella had been quite taken aback by Adam's prompt arrival at the decision to which she had imagined she was tactfully leading him. She had not expected results for another two months, which would have given her time to get an answer from Mark to what she conceived to be a diplomatic letter. Adam's directness scattered her plans for the time. She was quite pleased at the proposal, though she sighed a little over its curt brevity (Adam had nearly torn it up as too fulsome!) but the more she viewed the simple outcome of it, which Adam evidently expected, the more dissatisfied she became. Supposing Mark was "sensible" (and she was by no means sure of this), and she became properly engaged and in a month or two married?

Married at Pieceminster from the Laurels—a skimpy, commonplace sort of wedding with a pretence at a trousseau at which all her friends would scoff behind her back—and Uncle Ben, whom she so disliked, to give her away, Hilda Peason and Mary Gabbins as bridesmaids—little beasts!— a third-rate wedding cake from the shop in High Street—and Adam's rich friends and relations to pour scorn on it all?

The thought of it all maddened her. She would

almost rather never marry at all than marry like that. It was so commonplace, so banal—and, besides this, supposing Mark was sensible and did not insist on stupid confidences being made. Why should Adam know of that silly school-girl episode—nothing had happened—but the tragedy of a broken heart. She had conceived it broken once—why should Adam know? Mrs. Crofton had advised forgetting it, but there was always Mark, with his stupid ideas about not taking advantage of his friend!

In ten minutes Stella had convinced herself that Mark would insist on Adam's knowing and that Adam would never understand, and that the door of escape would be closed forever.

At the midday dinner Mrs. Forrester had asked who she had heard from, and in answer Stella had in silence and with considerable dignity laid Adam's letter before her.

"Well, well, well, my dear," cried Mrs. Forrester, when she had finished it. "Of course it is a great chance for you, but we must wait and see what Mark says."

Stella flashed round at her in an outbreak of genuine passion.

"Mark? What has it to do with Mark? Why should I wait to hear what he says? It is I who am asked to marry Adam—not Mark!"

Mrs. Forrester was deeply perturbed. She did her best to appease her offended daughter, but the habit of years was too strong for her to discountenance Mark's authority. She merely suggested a compromise which deceived neither of them.

"Dear child, Mr. Preston is Mark's greatest friend. Of course he will be pleased. I only meant to say he was the only man nearly concerned for you, and it would be only right to tell him before answering."

Stella gave a little hard laugh.

"What you really meant to say was that Mark does not want me to marry Adam—Mark always disliked me, always sees the worst of me, and he doesn't think me good enough for Adam! You needn't trouble to explain it away. Mark told me as much before he went."

Mrs. Forrester began weeping.

"I am sure Mark only wants to do what is right and best for you. It isn't right to say he dislikes you—he's your brother—and I am sure a very——"

Stella interrupted again as she leant over and gathered up her letter.

"And I am sure Mark will do anything he can to stop my happiness. He won't even think of you! Adam is rich and could do heaps for us. You might think of that. Mark will make it the excuse to refuse."

She had touched the most vulnerable spot in her mother's armour, and she watched the effect of her words with an odd sense of shame. She was not sure if she wanted her mother to consent to her marriage or not, but she was sure now she wanted to marry Adam at all costs—before Mark had any voice in the matter. Already to her ill-balanced mind Mark's opposition had assumed gigantic proportions and she had persuaded herself it was a fight between him and herself for the possession of Adam. There is no doubt the vivid pictures her fertile imagination had drawn of that third-rate wedding lent force to her illusions and she was by now incapable of disentangling the grain of truth on which that illusion rested.

But because there was a grain of truth in it she was enabled in subsequent correspondence to impress the same on Adam, till he at last shared her belief that for unknown reasons Mark would oppose the marriage and that Mrs. Forrester was really rendering poor Stella's life miserable by secret opposition.

Even so, Adam was just to Mark and saw nothing

worse in his old friend's attitude than a silly pride that he—a poor man—had secured his richest friend for his sister. It was ridiculous of Mark, but Adam did not consider it unnatural, and was for writing direct and squashing any such objection forever. Stella argued that Mark would then telegraph direct to her mother, who would hold tenaciously to any command thus received and probably dispatch her to a remote corner of Ireland, where Uncle Ben and his uncongenial offspring lived.

The groundwork for this assertion lay in the fact that one day Mrs. Forrester, troubled by Stella's tragic face, had asked her if she would like to go to the Crossman's in Ireland till they could hear from Mark, for she had adhered with all the obstinacy of a weak person to her refusal to allow any engagement till Mark approved.

Adam began to lose patience. He could make nothing at all about this bother over so simple a matter. Mrs. Forrester, when interviewed, had been personally nice to him, but she refused to discuss the situation, saying she was only an old woman and had promised Mark to refer Stella's future to him. She resisted all Adam's attempts to come straight to the point with a clever ability that annoyed him and made him the readier to believe Stella's hints of undue pressure and persecution, which were underlined by her white face and shadowed eyes.

At length he arrived at the point towards which she was now definitely striving, and that was a marriage by special license in London, and so "an end to this nonsense!"

He wrote her as follows:

I am not a scoundrel or unfit to be your husband. I am not a minor—nor are you. I can keep you in something more than comfort, and there's no sense in this idiotic position. I should marry you, whatever Mark says. So why

wait and worry yourself ill for nothing? If you care for me enough to do without all the fuss of an ordinary wedding, you had better come up to London by the 10:04 train, and I'll get my cousin, Jane Mitchen, to meet you at Paddington and drive you to the church and I'll see about a special license and all that, getting some decent rooms in London, if the Colonel permits. We won't start with a house, as the regiment may be moved from Woolwich soon. Also, I don't want you bothered with housekeeping. I think you said an aunt was coming on a visit to you. You had better get her date fixed, so that when you leave your mother won't be alone. Now, be a sensible girl, and say yes, and let's have done with this shilly-shallying. I wouldn't ask you to do it if I could not arrange it properly and have some of my own people to meet you. Do trust me: you know I love you, and I like to think you care a bit for me—enough to put aside ordinary conventions!

Even then Stella was true to her original rôle of adventuress, and deliberated gravely as to whether the existence in mere lodgings in London was sufficient compensation for the social triumph of a public third or fourth rate wedding in her birth town.

It was clear that if romance was to be a stepping-stone into her new life Stella would have to provide the material herself. Adam would supply the common sense of the partnership.

She wrote to Adam, telling him her aunt was coming about April the fourth, and that she would trust herself in his hands. The intervening time she spent convincing herself she was doing a desperate thing and that the decision had been a prodigious effort of will!

CHAPTER VI

"Every Straw Shows the Way the Wind Blows"

I

"ARE you quite sure it won't tire you too much to dine out to-night?" demanded Adam.

He was standing over the chair where he had planted Stella, with the command she was to rest.

Stella, in spite of her white face and over-bright eyes, was not in the least tired, and had no desire to rest, but it was pleasant to be fussed over, so long as it did not prevent an evening more in accordance with the excitement that throbbed through her than a *tête-à-tête* dinner with Adam in the room she had hardly yet looked at.

"I'd love to dine out somewhere," she said. "It wouldn't tire me a bit. Besides, it is only right to celebrate the event."

Adam bent and kissed her with a gust of sudden passion that surprised her into delicious tremours. She would have liked the demonstration to be coupled with words as torrential in import, but she had yet to learn that any demonstration from Adam would take the form of sudden disconcerting action rather than vocal interpretation of the same. He drew himself up now abruptly and went to the window. The cold spring sunshine fluttered across the windy Park opposite in little gusts of petulant gaiety. At the street corners passers-by made wild clutches at hats, and

clung on to skirts as the wind buffeted them. A passing motor back-fired badly and caused Adam to frown. His observations had only lasted a minute, but that minute ought to have been given to Stella, who turned her head and looked at him over the low lounge chair. He could see her eyes, questioning and pleading under the shade of her hat. He jerked himself together.

"Look here, Stella, you will want to unpack and settle down. I'll go out and order dinner somewhere. We'll go to a theatre to-morrow; it would be too much for you to-night." He smiled at her and took off her hat a little clumsily. "I'm responsible, you know."

Her face was just sufficiently clouded for him to appreciate the fact that she preferred his presence to his absence. He touched her face with a little awed embarrassment.

"You don't mind, do you? You'd like to settle down. I'll see your trunk's unstrapped. I can unpack it myself when I come in. It will all look more home-like when you have something about."

Stella sat up and stroked the feather in her hat.

"Yes, I suppose it will." She gave a little sigh. "Don't be long, though."

He looked at the clock.

"I'll be back at four; and, see here, you may unpack for half an hour and then you are to lie down."

"You think I am made of china, Adam?"

"Yes. Best Worcester!" he laughed. "Good-bye, dear."

At the door he resisted his desire to return and kiss her, but once outside he did look up at the window, and she was standing there, half-hidden by the thin silk curtain, and she kissed her hand to him.

It was rather splendid having some one to stand at a window and kiss their hand to you! A confused

sense of companionship with some tremendous force exhilarated him, and the more he was conscious of his exhilaration the more he was careful to hide any expression of it and it fed on concealment.

He met Jim Streeter in Trafalgar Square, who was anxious to have Adam's opinion of two special gunmakers. Adam gave it quietly and concisely, without undue haste or trace of divided attention, but when Streeter suggested they should go to Purdey's and inspect guns, he said with careless *sang froid:*

"Thanks, but I must go and book a dinner at the Savoy for my wife and myself to-night."

Streeter gasped.

"Your—what?"

"My wife," said Adam seriously. "I was married this morning at twelve-thirty. We are staying at 107 Marble Arch. Do look us up one day. Good-bye."

He went off, denying himself even the pleasure of contemplating poor Streeter's complete collapse at the astounding news.

Meanwhile, Stella, having languidly taken off her coat and furs—Adam's gift of that morning, these latter—proceeded to make a more careful survey of the rooms. They were panelled in oak and their sombreness only partially relieved by the light silk curtains and white margined engravings on the walls. There were flowers enough, but not too many, and with the additions of a few good pieces of embroidery and some cushions from Liberty's, Stella decided the sitting-room would be all she could desire. She opened the door leading to the bedroom, which communicated in turn with Adam's dressing-room and the bathroom. It was indeed a complete little suite, not at all what she had pictured when Adam had announced his decision in favour of rooms instead of a house. Her idea of rooms had been limited to the ordinary seaside lodging affair, and for five minutes after reading

his letter the whole scheme of things had nearly fallen to the ground on this account. The bedroom was well furnished. She had indeed never possessed such a good wardrobe in her life, and there was a long glass with electric light placed rightly for self-contemplation. She pulled open the big drawers and cupboards that were to hold the clothes that Adam would buy for her. It seemed almost superfluous to unpack her own trunk with its foolish little assortment.

She began unpacking, however, and presently came on Adam's photograph, and sat down on the bed to look at it.

It was splendid to belong to him! Other women would envy her her husband. A little pleased smile hovered about her lips at the thought. She did not like other women much, or rather she liked Adam so much that there was no room for extension of the affections.

Adam could have married any one—even a rich girl, and instead he had married Stella Forrester, with no money, no friends to count, nothing but herself. She kissed the photo, put it where she could see it, and finished her work.

Then she went into Adam's dressing-room. His luggage was on the floor, and she tried to open the portmanteau but it was locked. The suitcase was open, for the brushes had been taken out. She slipped the lock and raised the lid very carefully. She wondered if her photograph was there under the silk dressing-gown and moved it gently. It was not in sight. The temptation to unpack for Adam was not solely prompted by desire to save him trouble. She really wanted to be quite sure he carried her photo about with him. Then she suddenly shut the case and went back to her own room. It occurred to her that Adam would not like her to rummage *amongst* his things.

Stella's desire to please Adam was quite genuine. It was at this juncture the most dominant emotion she knew. She was not only in love with her husband, she was profoundly grateful to him, and this was a new emotion to experience.

Adam returned at the stroke of four and scolded her gently for not resting, though he approved the little changes she had made in the rooms when she pointed them out to him. She wore a white silk frock that night, a lemon-coloured sash and an evening wrap to match. The soft colour enhanced the whiteness of her skin and the darkness of her hair and eyes. She was quite prepared to face the chill evening air without more protection, but Adam scoffed at the idea of such folly, and wrapped her in her thickest coat to the detriment of the evening wrap. She sighed a little at the thought of it, and then grew happy, remembering she could now buy another and she had had this one for four years.

They dined at the Savoy and sat afterwards in the lounge, drinking coffee and watching the brilliant little world. Adam did not talk much; he was not much amused, but he supposed Stella liked it. Women always seem to like these things. Presently a party of five people came in whom he knew well.

"There are the Losfords," he said to Stella. "We might go and talk to them if you like." He put aside his cigarette and stood up.

The impression of unreality which had been slowly clouding Stella's brain increased rather than diminished by action. She followed Adam through the maze of little tables towards a group of three men and two women, and she heard Adam's voice saying to a white-haired but handsome lady, "Lady Losford, may I introduce my wife to you?" and caught the little gasp of astonishment that even Lady Losford's perfect manners could not quite suppress.

"Yes," she heard Adam explaining, "we were married quite recently and quietly. Stella and I were unconventional enough to want our wedding to ourselves."

Lady Losford's voice, addressing her directly, brought Stella nearer actualities.

"My dear, I am very glad to know you, but Adam has defrauded us of a very pretty wedding. I'm sure it was more his doing than yours."

She made room for her by her side. The younger and smarter lady leant forward and said softly:

"One must be thankful Adam has been sufficiently conventional to introduce us at all, Mrs. Preston."

Stella realised that this was the first time she had been called by her new name. She looked at her critically with half-shut eyes and decided the speech was not meant to be kindly.

"There does not seem to be anything unconventional in dining at the Savoy," she answered slowly. "At least half the world seems to be doing the same thing." Then she turned to Lady Losford and said with pathetic confidence:

"Do you know, I have never dined here before."

Adam talked to the men. Now and then his eyes roamed to his wife with open content. She was getting on very well with his friends, and they admired her, he could see. Lady Losford, indeed, described her afterwards as "a charming child with something very pathetic about her eyes."

At half-past ten Adam stood up. It was the hour at which he had made up his mind to leave.

"You've had a tiring day, Stella; we ought to go home."

She was for the moment not too well pleased, but she rose obediently. Mrs. Sladen, the younger woman, smiled.

"*Oh,* Mrs. Preston, don't create dangerous prece-

dents. All these men are married. Think of the false impression you will make on their minds."

"Precedents were made to be broken," said Stella. "Besides, I promised Adam we would go home early."

Adam wrapped her up carefully, but he said nothing till they were on their way home, when he remarked:

"You didn't promise to come away at any time, Stella."

She slipped her hand into his.

"Silly boy; didn't I promise to obey you this morning?"

It was, however, the first time she had thought of that.

Adam's face cleared. For half a minute he held on to his feelings and then he put his arms round her and pulled her nearer him—so close she could hear the beating of his heart. There was a scent of verbena in her hair and in her dress that mounted to his head. This thing that he had done was really of tremendous importance after all.

II

Felicity lay back in a long chair in the little sunny loggia of the Hotel de Palmer, which crowned one of the little hills to the northwest of Ajaccio. The town itself straggled in a half-hearted way up to the hotel, just clutching on to it through the medium of scattered villas and stray hotels, as if but languidly interested in establishing any connection between itself and the immense row of gilded letters, that with this disproportionate glitter called attention to the thin yellow building.

Felicity liked the remoteness of the place; liked looking down on the white town below, at the blue green waters of the beautiful bay, at the hillside rich

in vegetation. She liked being out of the ordinary little throng of visitors, in close touch with the hills themselves, so that the far-off heights, where snow still glittered, seemed acceptable. She would plan expeditions up there, but though she had now been here five weeks, she had not done much more than plan. After all, it was very pleasant here in the sunny loggia. On wet days she had her letters, her books, and the native embroidery she was doing for Veronica's boy. On fine days without any particular effort, she would wander out on the hillside and watch the little black and white lambs, leaping about with their silky mothers, or gossip with the old priest who shepherded a still wider flock here on the borders of the Maguir. She seldom went down to Ajaccio itself. It was no particular pleasure to her to drive up, and she had no inclination to walk, even by the lemon and orange shaded roads.

When she and Veronica had been here five winters ago, it had been Veronica who had shirked climbing either of the possible heights above them, and Felicity had promised herself that this time she would make a climb, and yet she had done nothing through all these pleasant peaceful days but drift contently. It had taken her until now really to readjust her life after the break of Veronica's marriage.

That other journey of hers, to the Canaries, had not been a conspicuous success. She had missed Veronica more in new surroundings than in the old ones of which Veronica had avowedly seen enough. That shorter expedition to Norway with Adam in the autumn had been, on the contrary, a great success. It was that which had really bridged over the restless sense of isolation and carried her to the good sense of freedom, on which she now luxuriated. Next leave they were perhaps going to Ireland together, salmon *fishing*. She had never caught a salmon and Adam

declared life was incomplete without the experience. Nothing had been settled. The idea had but been mooted.

Meanwhile Veronica was happy, content and well looked after. It was an almost ceaseless wonder how Felicity's responsibilities with regard to Veronica had slipped from her. She had indeed never fully realised how big a part the charge of her child had played in her life till she stood free from it. To see Veronica now was to share her happiness, to see the fruition of promises, the death of little fears, and to know for a certainty that her child was, humanly speaking, in hands that could hold her safe and insure her happiness in a measure for which Felicity could only feel a passionate unspoken gratitude. She would not stay with them for any length of time at first; indeed, Veronica complained of the shortness of her visits, but Dominic insisted Madre was not to be pressed. She was to feel free to come and go as she would. That was his ruling and Veronica accepted it.

Adam had had hopes his regiment would move to Ireland, in which case she had vague dreams of taking a house there for the season, but Woolwich, instead of Ireland, was the fate of The Royal Sphinxs, and later on Hampstead and the Bessingtons would be her solution if she wanted to be in touch with Adam.

She had almost decided to give up this solitary life of hers and take one or other of her many god-daughters about with her, but she knew she was not yet tired of her complete freedom and at the back of her mind there lurked an incomplete idea that she owed something to Stella Forrester, though what the obligation was she had no wish to discover. In the face of Mark's odd words to her on the evening of Veronica's wedding two years ago, her wisest course was to forget Stella's existence if she and Adam were to be kept apart. She smiled a little as she thought of it.

Adam wasn't really likely to lose his head now. There was an incongruity in contemplating the two that bordered on the humorous. Poor dear Mark! All the same Stella was an odd girl, and it was no wonder he was anxious about her.

At this point her meditations were broken off by the entrance of Luigi, the waiter, with her letters.

There was a fair pile. One from Veronica, which she read first, and which contained a great deal of news about her small son and the garden, but practically nothing about Dominic except that he was well. Then half a dozen letters from friends and protégés, some two or three business ones—and one from Adam. She kept this till last, opened the business ones first, then the personal letters. The second of them was to announce the engagement of Mary Fuller with Jim Streeter, a most eminently satisfactory arrangement. After expanding two sheets over her happiness and heartfelt gratitude to Madre for some smoothing of their path, Mary proceeded to general news, and ended with this:

> By the way, why did you never tell us of Adam Preston's marriage? Jim met him in Trafalgar Square the day before yesterday and he calmly announced he was married and living at 107 Marble Arch and asked Jim to call. I said it must be a hoax, but Jim is dead certain it isn't and we are going round to see this afternoon.

The letter fluttered from Felicity's hands, and she leant back in her chair with shut eyes, for the world seemed to be turning round inexplicably. . . . Of course it was a hoax . . . on some one's part! . . . Then suddenly she sat up, brushing the letters right and left in haste. There was one from Adam some*where*! She found it and tore it open.

107 Marble Arch, April the Fourth.

My dear Madre:

It will be a bit of a surprise to you to hear I am married. I married Stella Forrester at St. Mary's, Paddington, yesterday.

Felicity's eyes flew to the date. It was written before Mary's letter, but Corsican posts were uncertain at best.

She came up to Paddington and my cousin, Jane Mitchen, met her and brought her to the church and we were married. Her mother had made such absurd difficulties that Stella was getting quite ill and I couldn't have that. You can have all other particulars when we meet. You know I am no good at letters. I had half a mind to write to you about it, but I have always held the belief a man's marriage concerns no one but himself, and if he wants advice over it it means he isn't sure of his own mind—beside which there was no real point in worrying you when you are having a good time. If you are writing to Mark you might say what awful rot his objections are, unless he objects to me personally. The C. O. wasn't too well pleased, but I explained the circumstances and in the end he was decent, and Mrs. C. O. will call. Hope you are fit and have done the climb you spoke of. Do you remember climbing up Monckton Farley and that boulder? What a jolly crash it went!

Yours ever,

ADAM.

Felicity let the letter fall on her lap and again leant back.

"It was not worth worrying you about it."

She could hardly have supposed words could hurt so much. Her stricken mind groped vaguely for some point in her own behaviour on which she could lay the blame for that amazing statement of his.

He had just tried to be considerate for her. She understood as much, and gave him credit for it, but what had she done, or not done, to merit such bitter consideration? How had she failed him, that at such

a crisis in his life he had left her out of his reckoning —for fear of worrying her? It was a crisis! She felt it in every fibre of her being, felt a nameless terror, a shadow of dark wings hanging over the future. The thought of Stella roused a fierce restlessness in her, urged her to action and movement!

But what action could be effectual since Adam was married!

And the marriage was foredoomed to failure, as Veronica was predestined for happiness!

Was even Stella, let alone Adam, to go through the dark waters she had passed through? Surely there must be some way to save them, although she had failed them at the outset and that in spite of warning.

She found the point of accusation against herself at last. It lay in her selfish indolence, that fancied, once free from the dear responsibility of her daughter, she was at liberty to lie about with empty mind and hands in a little sunny loggia here in the enchanted isle, while the son of her adoption had no one but her to turn to in the most momentous decision of his life. He was so young, so very young, in his dear, arrogant independence, and she loved him the more for it. So young in that immature consideration for her which hurt so excessively that it would need all her courage properly to refute it to him, face to face, with a smile on her lips.

And he had harnessed himself for all his young beautiful life to—danger! She made no compromise with her instinct. Dragged up no battery of ordinary common sense against intuitive knowledge. Stella Forrester (for some reason) married to Adam spelt danger! Mark had known it, and Mark, like herself, loved Adam. He had warned her and she had a little contemptuously put his warning on one side. The responsibility was hers!

Her inaction vanished with her languid content.

She forgot the fatigue that had really kept her prisoner so long. It was quite plain to her what she must do. She must return to England. She must be in touch with them. She must be friends with Stella. If need arose, Stella would never refrain from telling her of it for fear of worrying her; she felt a little ironical amusement at the idea. That was all that remained for her to do—and to write to Mark. But she would not write to-day.

She went inside to find a timetable.

There were no steamers starting till Wednesday, and this was Monday. She would book a passage and wire for a seat in the Genoa express and go straight to London.

To the Westminster Palace Hotel?—or should it be to Hampstead?

The thought—not of Veronica, but of Dominic and his quiet common sense—was steadying. Yes, she would go to them!

These matters seen to, she had nothing left to do but wander out into the town and loiter on the terrace before the hotel. She did not wish to toil down to the shores of the bay. Her eyes went wistfully to the white-crowned mountains she had never scaled.

Why should she not make the expedition, after all!

There was to-morrow. She was not at all tired now. She had plenty of energy driving her to action. She had had plenty of rest. The doctor had said that was all she needed. She brushed that thought quickly away. Even to herself she hated confessing she had consulted a doctor. With it she brushed aside also the little warnings he had given her.

She meant to say good-bye to being lazy. It was almost as bad as admitting she was growing old, which was palpably absurd. And she very much wanted to tell Adam she had done the climb!

III

Adam and Stella were at breakfast, or rather, Adam was halfway through his, and Stella, in a becoming negligée was about to commence hers. There were some letters for her beside her plate, and she was wondering whether they were placed there by the maid or Adam, and, if it be Adam, whether he had noticed that there was one from Mark, redirected from the Pieceminster postoffice. Stella had taken the precaution to have her letters readdressed straight from there, as Mrs. Forrester had a trick of treating certain letters as "family property."

Stella did not wish to read Mark's letter till Adam was gone. She might possibly not wish to say she had heard from him even. She slipped the letter under a second, which was from her mother, the first since the marriage, for, though Adam had punctually and exactly informed Mrs. Forrester of the same, he had written from his club, and had not given her their address, thinking that if she meant to make a fuss, it would be better for the letter to reach him at the club, or at his mess. However, such a simple solution had not occurred to Mrs. Forrester, who spent four days bewailing the fact that she did not know where to write to the culprits, and rereading to her sister first Adams' quiet, business-like account, and then Stella's original note stating the fact of her departure in terms of reproach and with a heartlessness that caused Mrs. Forrester to weep on each perusal. At last, at Adam's instigation, Stella wrote again and told of her own comfort and unimaginable happiness and gave their address. This was Mrs. Forrester's answer.

If she were only quite sure Adam had not seen the letters she would have preferred to reserve this also, but there it lay on the top, with the postmark and the

thin, pointed writing, and since Adam had just moved the toast-rack, she could not believe he would not have noticed it and guessed.

"Anything yet from your mother?" he asked quite naturally, as she reshuffled the letters again.

Whereupon she opened it, read it with half her attention. The other half being occupied in concocting excuses in case Adam wanted to see it and it proved unsuitable for his eyes.

Such an idea, however, did not enter into Adam's head, and when Stella eventually handed him the innoculated letter he took it reluctantly and would have preferred her to give him an abbreviated version of it. It was inconsequent, a little hysterical and wholly foolish, full of reiterated wonders as to what Mark would say, and ended by sending love to both and hoping that Adam would remember to impress on Mark that she had done nothing to help on the marriage which she *hoped* might be a success. Then there was a long p. s., asking Stella to keep her eyes open for sales, and a list of commissions she would like executed if Stella could get any of them as bargains.

Adam read the first and last sentence, omitted the postscript, and handed it back.

"I can't think why you are all so afraid of poor old Mark," he said. "He isn't going to call me out for marrying his sister, and he ought to be jolly glad I've taken the responsibility of her off his shoulders!"

He smiled across at Stella good-humouredly, but she regarded him with suddenly nervous eyes and then dropped her gaze to her plate and to the letter from Mark, which she had now edged off the table into her lap.

"I don't know why you should think me such a responsibility," she began plaintively. "I—I don't mean to be."

"You little goose! Of course a wife's a responsi-

bility! Jolly pleasant one, too! Mark had better get one of his own if he's in such a tear at losing you. Pass the marmalade, dear."

She could not avoid standing up when he moved to go, and was on thorns lest he should see the letter, which had now slipped from her lap to the floor. But Adam saw nothing. He was debating whether he had time to buy a new pair of gloves on his way to Woolwich.

"Look here, Stella, I can't get home to tea to-day," he said as he was starting, "so amuse yourself nicely."

She looked dismayed.

"Oh, Adam!"

"Even soldiers have work to do."

"At four in the afternoon?"

"Sometimes. You'll be all right. Go and buy things. Have you enough money?"

Stella, who with all her faults was not extravagant, said she had plenty.

"We ought to hear something from Madre soon," Adam remarked as he went out. "It's a pity she is abroad all this time. She would have looked after you well."

"You are very fond of her, I suppose?" Stella questioned, following him with her eyes.

"She's a rattling good sort. One of the best! Good-bye, old girl."

He was gone at last and Stella was free to read her brother's letter, though she did not hurry over starting it. She was dimly apprehensive; Mark so seldom wrote to her, and though she knew her mother would have mentioned Adam's first visit to Pieceminster long ago, she herself in the solitary letter she had written him since, had been careful to omit any mention of Adam, though when she had told Adam she had written, and left him to draw his own conclusions, *Adam* had insisted on cabling the news of their mar-

riage to Mark. But there had been no cable back, and it would be three weeks more before an answer would reach them by post.

Still, after all, Mark's approval or disapproval could not matter now. She was married and, taking refuge in that thought, she at last opened the letter.

Tirawoo, India.

Dear Stella:

"I gather from Mother's letter that Adam Preston has been down to Pieceminster and of course came to see you. He could not do less if he were there on business, but I hope you will remember what I said in London. Don't think me a brute, my dear girl, but apart from what I know of both your characters—and they aren't a bit suited to each other—I couldn't let you marry my best friend unless you prepared to be absolutely frank with him. Personally I think you should be with any one, but in any other case you could decide for yourself. Here you can't. However, I hope I am only giving you an unnecessary warning and disagreeable advice, for Adam isn't really your sort of man and you may not care two straws about him. I should like you to marry. I think you would be happier so, and I don't think now there is the slightest reason against it or ever would be. I'm awfully sorry to have to appear such a bugbear, but I am really thinking as much of your chance of happiness as of Adam's. I've been up country shooting and found your letter and Mother's waiting me. I wonder if Madre is back in England yet. Don't forget if ever you want help or are in doubt what to do, she's the person to go to.

Yours ever,

MARK.

Stella crumpled the letter in her hands and gazed at the fire with a sullen frown on her face. She hated Mark for the moment, and she hated Mrs. Crofton, that both Mark and Adam were always trying to drag her into her life."

"Do not care two straws for Adam!"

That was all Mark knew! She gave a scornful little laugh. Why, she adored every inch of his big body!

He was hers, hers, hers, no one, man or woman, should interfere between them. For a furious moment her mind struggled with a chaotic blind rage, from which she dragged herself with difficulty.

What right had Mark to talk about Adam being his best friend? She was his wife and that was better than a hundred best friends. He wanted no best friends—he had her!

As to telling him all those old stories and remembering old dangers, that was sheer stupidity. Even their precious Mrs. Crofton had said it was a mistake, from the little she knew. There was nothing whatever to consult Mrs. Crofton about. She wanted nobody interfering. Why, when she had at last got something out of life, should she risk losing it to satisfy Mark's ridiculous notions? Fancy writing all that! He had said it all before, too—every word of it!

She got some sharp satisfaction from dropping his letter into the fire and watching it curl and blacken and crumble to nothing.

Then she rose, rang the bell to get breakfast cleared, and decided she would go out shopping.

She had still hosts of things to buy and plenty of money to buy with. It never troubled her in the least that Adam had to provide her trousseau. She was perfectly prepared to accept all the good things he heaped upon her. She bought carefully and she enjoyed getting just what she wanted and taking her time over it. She liked riding in taxis, liked studying shop windows, spending a whole morning buying shoes where it pleased her and an afternoon buying hosiery to match. So far time had not hung heavy on her hands and there was always Adam's return at four o'clock to look forward to. She preferred the evenings when they went out together. The second *glances* that women and even men cast at him were

honey to her, but she had learnt to simulate content when he decreed an evening at home.

To-day she was going to buy gloves and be fitted. She would lunch at Harrod's. Stella had no shopping knowledge beyond the big emporiums and well-advertised firms and Bond Street and similar expensive regions still frightened her a little with their exclusive looking windows and fine ladies who met one, not as an equal, but with an air of social superiority. But since she knew what she wanted and what was appropriate to the rather bizarre style she affected, she shopped well and wisely, and Adam, though he had some qualms at her daring, could not but see she knew what suited her.

It was not till she was returning home and was nearly at her own doorstep that any shadow of discontent crossed her mind. There was a smart car waiting outside the house and two ladies were on the doorstep. For a moment she was seized with panic lest they should be callers for her. She did not wish to receive callers in her outdoor clothes. She walked on, therefore, to the corner of the street, and glancing round saw the ladies had been admitted. They were, therefore, for "the drawing-room floor," not for her. With some unreason she now wished they had been for her. The idea of her solitary room struck her as forlorn, and she retraced her steps slowly. If Adam wouldn't be in and there were no callers it would not be worth putting on her new afternoon frock.

They had had no callers at all yet but the Streeters, and she had been out then. She began wondering if any one would ever call. Lady Losford had said she would, but had since written to say she had gone down to Wiltshire to the Massendens for a week.

Suppose Adam got into a habit of staying away to tea?

Her quickly responsive mind was enmeshed instantly

in a sense of isolation and self-pity. She had been told once she should never live alone, or allow herself to get depressed. This recollection awoke a dim sense of uneasy fear, which she might easily have argued away, but didn't. She took it with her into the quiet hall and involuntarily looked over her shoulder as she closed the door, as if aware some one or something had entered with her. There was a slightly hunted look in her eyes as she entered the sitting-room.

There peacefully sitting before the fire waiting for her was Mrs. Crofton.

Stella gave a little gasp of amazement and the hunted look vanished. In spite of her momentary anger against Mrs. Crofton that morning she was glad and strangely relieved to see her. Some burden of responsibility seemed lifted from her shoulders. It never for an instant occurred to her that Mrs. Crofton might not be too well pleased at Adam's marriage. Stella was far too interested in herself to worry about other people's opinion of her. The little shy, embarrassed air with which she greeted her visitor was only her natural attitude towards the unexpected, but it became her well.

Felicity felt a sudden throb of compunction for her own attitude, which, if not hostile, had been at least critical. Stella had undoubtedly improved by marriage. She was well dressed and the appealing look in her eyes was no longer entirely mournful, but rather challenging. Felicity's own kind eyes took in the change instantly, and she drew Stella to her and kissed her, a practice to which she was chary.

"I'm all alone to-day," said Stella, as she rang for tea. "Adam won't be back till late. He'll be so vexed at missing you. We thought you were still in Corsica."

"So I was three days ago. I arrived last night. *I*—I had to come—home. Do you know, Adam's let-

ter was one of the biggest surprises I have ever had in my life."

"It seems to have surprised every one. Why should all Adam's friends imagine he was never to marry?" There was resentment in her voice.

"We didn't think that. We were only surprised he did not tell us before." It was easier to speak in the collective. Felicity knew she would make no advance with Stella by claiming special rights of friendship with Adam. She was herself relieved that he was not here. It was easier seeing Stella first.

Tea appeared and Stella devoted herself to her duties as hostess. Her first sense of immeasurable relief was twisted up now with a little thread of antagonism. If Felicity had questioned her as to her marriage she would have bristled with hostility, but because she asked no questions and appeared to take it all as an unexpected but quite ordinary proceeding, Stella chose to feel aggrieved. Felicity asked how Adam was, remarked how much more comfortable it must be for him here than in solitary rooms, or at Woolwich, and she conveyed the impression that the fact that there had been no callers only showed tact and consideration on the part of others.

"I consider myself an exception and not bound to exercise tact," she admitted gaily. In fact, she displayed the guile of the serpent and the proverbial gentleness of the dove and an exceeding tact that went far towards again undoing that twisted thread of antagonism in Stella's attitude towards her.

"I expect you'll be tremendously happy," was the most personal remark she made, and Stella missed the wistful look in her eyes that accompanied it, and said she was tremendously happy.

"Like Veronica and Dominic. The two pair of you should be a stand-off against the nonsense that's talked of marriage nowadays. By the way, Veronica would

have come with me to-day but Christopher has a cold so she couldn't."

"Hasn't she a nurse?" asked Stella idly, not because she was interested in Veronica's boy's cold, for she did not like children, but for something to say.

"A splendid one! Still babies, you know, require a proportionate number of people to look after them in exact inverse ratio of their age and position in the family circle, as first, second or third arrival."

Stella said she would like to see Veronica.

At five o'clock Felicity rose to leave. It was no use to wait for Adam.

Moreover, she felt a strong desire to meet him alone first. She would have planned nothing to this end, but she would welcome the chance that made it possible.

All the way back to Hampstead she struggled to set her impressions in order and find the balance that would incontestably allay her odd sense of panic which she told herself now must spring from Mark's over-fastidious sense of obligation towards his friend.

Christopher Dominic was being put to bed when she got back. His cold was better and it was a besprinkled nurse and mother that lifted a frisky merman out of his bath. The merman struggled to escape to Madre—somehow no one had thought of imposing the title of Granny on Felicity—who was leaning against the table, watching the group in the firelight and had done nothing to attract Master Christopher. She only laughed when the wet little form strained towards her and put herself within easier range of him.

"Business first, my dear Christopher," she said with mock solemnity. "Little mermen always get dry before they play!"

She stood looking down at him with thoughtful eyes, but the baby apparently found a smile lurking in *their* depth, for he laughed and continued to hold out

his hands to her, and having obtained a finger held it tightly. It was an odd fact with Madre that she never had to talk or exert herself to attract the attention of children. She was indeed no adept at baby talk, but children of all ages would behave as Christopher now did, demanding little beyond contact with her and the attention of her smiling eyes.

It was Veronica who carried her son to bed, but though he cuddled his mother with heartwhole affection, his bright eyes looked over her shoulder towards Madre as if he shared with her some secret about his own appreciation of his pretty mother.

"Well?" demanded Veronica, when they were both seated again in the drawing room. "What was Stella like and how are they?"

"I didn't see Adam. They have charming rooms. Stella looks well and quite as happy as she should look. She was out when I arrived, so I waited. She will be very pleased to see you."

"Yes, we'll consider that all said. Let us get to the gist of the matter."

"Haven't you got it? Adam wasn't there."

"Nonsense, you silly little Madre! Don't pretend. Go on?"

"I am wondering if Mark has a kink in his mind. Seriously, Veronica, Stella *is* improved."

"Already?" with a faint lift of her brows.

"It's the certainty of the change; the getting what she wanted," returned Felicity meditatively. "Yes, I think that's it—she has permanently changed her surroundings and she may permanently change her outlook, if her eyes keep as now."

"Her eyes?"

"They are not so pathetic. They are even a little defiant. She has instinctive taste. The room looked charming, and yet she has probably never had things

as she liked before. Now she can—Adam won't interfere!"

"I'll call to-morrow," said Veronica virtuously.

"Do. She won't be interested in Christopher, let me remind you."

"I shouldn't think of wasting intelligent conversation about Christopher on Stella Preston! Oh, poor old Eve! How odd it seems! How could he be so stupid!"

"Perhaps he's been very wise. The ends of the line meet sometimes."

At which point Dominic returned and Felicity had to recapitulate her news.

Dominic watched her while he listened. He had learnt to read as much from her face as from her lips.

Adam's marriage in any case claimed his interest, though he pronounced no judgment on it as to its wisdom or folly. His interest was devoid of personal anxiety and was contemplative rather than active. But Madre's anxious concern that had brought her hot-footed from her sungirt isle on the first possible day interested him even more.

She had said no single word to either Veronica or himself that could betray her "hurt" at Adam's consideration for her. Surprise, a little excitement, and some anxiety was all her attitude had suggested to Veronica, but Dominic knew the hurt was there and that some other feeling contributed to the look he had once or twice surprised in Madre's eyes. That evening when he found himself alone with her he faced the matter boldly.

"I've told Veronica to ask the Prestons to supper on Sunday night. You won't feel better over it all until you've seen Adam, Madre."

She tried to look at him with a little defiant surprise *and* failed. A sense of relief crept over her. If

Dominic knew that much she need not pretend to him.

"He really meant to save me worry, Dominic."

"You really mean to save him from criticism."

She smiled.

"There is nothing to criticise—and I am nearly certain all will be well. He will make something of Stella. She is really in love with him."

He nodded.

Felicity continued to gaze into the fire and he—waited. He hoped Veronica would not return just yet. As if she read his thought she began speaking quickly.

"I should feel very badly about it, Dominic, if—if it did not turn out well, because Mark *did* warn me, you see. He did not want Stella to marry Adam. He had an idea people would think he had trapped his rich friend for his penniless sister. That was so like Mark!"

"Yes. Is that the reason he gave you?"

"I—I think so—no I don't think he gave any reason except he did not think them suited."

"Mark is not such an experienced judge of character as to know that. I expect it will be all right, Madre. Adam isn't a fool and he has a will of his own. He will keep hold of her. Morbidity won't flourish near him."

Her face brightened perceptibly.

"Yes, that's it—what I feel. He is so sane and healthy; she will shake off her—morbidness."

"No doubt. But, Madre, it's none of your fault in any case."

"It is," said Felicity slowly. "That's what troubles me, Dominic. I ought to have kept in touch with Stella. I didn't only because I did not much like her. If I had, this couldn't have happened without my knowledge."

"I don't believe it would have made any difference at all."

"Adam did say in one letter he had been to Pieceminster and seen the Forresters. I thought then of asking her to come out to me—it was when I first went to Corsica, but I didn't do it. I wanted to enjoy it alone. It was pure selfishness."

Her locked fingers were pressed together till her hands were white, and though she was looking down and he standing so he could not see her face, he knew it was also white and distressed. But she had at last voiced her real trouble and he felt a relief.

"She wouldn't have come then, Madre, if you had asked her a hundred times," he said earnestly. "I've a far more impartial judgment than you over this matter. You were in every respect entitled to your own leisure and it would have been of no service to ask her. She wouldn't have come."

He reiterated this fact with an assurance that carried conviction and comfort, though she was not yet ready to admit it.

"And very likely in a month's time you will be thanking your stars you didn't do anything to prevent it," he added more lightly. "You are not to be jealous because Adam can look after himself!"

She looked up and knew he was laughing at her then and she laughed back and then gave a sigh of relief. It was good to have Dominic to turn to. She felt profoundly grateful—and she was glad she had come to Hampstead.

IV

It was Dominic who arranged that her first meeting with Adam should be private. Veronica suggested asking some other friends to meet the Prestons on Sunday. She was pleased enough to see Adam but

undiluted Stella rather alarmed her. Dominic, however, negatived the idea.

"Next time, if you like, and, Veronica," he added, "Madre would probably like to see Adam by herself. You must manage to take Stella upstairs to take off her hat and keep her there ten minutes if you can."

"All that trouble for a possible whim of Madre's?"

"It's not a trouble to a clever person like you—and I don't believe you know how big a thing this marriage is to Madre. How would you feel if Christopher went and established himself in the spare room and would have nothing to do with the nice nursery you had made him?"

"You dear old silly," she laughed; "Christopher will *never* marry without telling me all about it. I am his mother; Madre isn't Adam's mother."

Whereupon Dominic told her she was without imagination, and kissed her. In her heart of hearts Veronica really did think that her husband was a little faddy over her mother's fancies. Still it was pleasant to gratify their little idiosyncrasies; they were both such dears.

She managed to be in the hall when the Prestons arrived on Sunday evening and to take Stella upstairs under pretext of seeing Christopher before he was asleep. Dominic ushered Adam into the drawing-room, saying he would be there directly, and so Adam found Felicity alone.

She was standing in the middle of the room, as she had stood from the moment she had heard his voice in the hall. The soft light from the rosy shades lent a glow to her face which was rather pale. She had dressed with especial care.

Adam was most tremendously pleased to see her. He took both the hands held out to him and said so, adding quickly:

"I say, Madre, how splendidly ripping you look and

how well! Is that Corsica? It was nice of you to come and see us the very first day you got back."

"Did you think I should wait a week?"

He did not read a shadow of reproach in her voice.

"Come and let me look at you in turn," she went on. "If I had known what you were up to I should have come back in time to—help."

"Yes, that's what I thought!" exclaimed Adam triumphantly. "That's why I didn't tell you. You were having such a ripping time and you didn't look well when you started and it would have been such a shame to bother you. What made you come back now? I thought you were to stay till the end of April?"

"I had to come back," she said quietly.

"Business?"

"Yes. Adam, my dear, you have lovely rooms and Stella knows how to make the best of them."

"They are decent. How do you think Stella is looking?"

"Wonderfully well. What did the regiment say?"

He laughed ruefully.

"I got rather hauled over the coals when I first told the Colonel, but in the end he was very decent about my living in town and they are all getting reconciled to it now. I'm pretty careful not to let it interfere with work and I didn't even ask for a honeymoon!"

This entirely commonplace conversation and Adam's innocence of any cause of reproach between them steadied her. The very unreality of their talk as compared to the conflicting trouble of her thoughts seemed a bridge to carry her from one attitude to another. Adam was unaware of the bridge, but he was faintly aware that Madre, being a woman, might be a little disappointed at not having a finger in "the wedding pie," as he put it to himself. So he showed, if possible, a shade more deference and attention than usual

and demanded her approval to his desire, not to bother Stella with housekeeping at first set off.

He was really anxious for Madre's approval of Stella and watched their meeting when the latter entered with some interest. Stella seemed pleased and even relieved to sit by Madre and talk to her. She did not like Veronica much and never felt at ease with her, and of Dominic she was frankly afraid. She said she did not like his eyes.

Adam, after watching them for a little time, felt duly satisfied and was able to give undivided attention to Veronica, who teased him and talked nonsense precisely as she had done five years ago.

Dominic saw far more than Adam saw. He watched with great interest Madre's siege of Stella's still uncertain regard. It rather reminded him of a child trying to catch a bird, only in this case his sympathies were all with the child. He divined, too, Stella's partly jealous attitude, fighting against her sense of newness and solitude that would find such good cover behind Madre's friendship. He divined also her vague fear and antagonism to men, just as he read in her little speeches, her looks and attitudes an almost uncalculated desire for attention. It was not so much that she was artificial as that it was her primary instinct to act and impress some audience with a sense of pregnant happenings.

"It's to be hoped Madre will catch her and keep good hold of her," was his summing up of the situation, "for there will be trouble between her and Adam before long."

CHAPTER VII

"That Inevitable Point in Life When the Past and Future Bending to Each Other Touch Issues."

I

It was six weeks at least before the serene honeymoon sea was seriously ruffled for Stella and Adam, and the ruffling happened this wise.

The cause of it was Mark's letter, or letters, in reply to Adam's wire cable, announcing the marriage.

He wrote a short letter to Adam, saying frankly he could have wished it otherwise, but that it was no personal objection to Adam that prompted his objection. That Stella was a lucky girl and he hoped she appreciated her luck, that he was sending them a present and that he wished them all happiness.

His letter to Stella was curt and to the point.

Dear Stella:

Since you have taken your own line, regardless of my wishes, I hope you at least took notice of my warning and told Adam why you were in Germany. If you haven't told him, I must. Please send me word by return mail. If you have, and Adam has accepted the very slight risk, then I am profoundly thankful and wish you every happiness and we'll bury the past forever. I've written to Mother, telling her not to worry. She was badly upset and I don't think you showed her proper consideration. Still, I suppose you rather lost your head. All good luck to you. Yours,

MARK.

The two letters arrived by the same post, Adam was opening his when Stella entered.

"Letter from Mark at last," he said cheerfully.

Stella saw her own letter, the only one for her, and as she sat down she wondered with dull anger if the sight of Mark's handwriting would always give her that queer, sick feeling that she was falling into an unfathomable pit. Seeing Adam engaged on his she opened it with an effort and read it. The solid earth seemed slipping from under her.

"That's all right then," said Adam, as he finished his. "Lot of rot, of course—still—you may as well see."

He tossed the letter across to her. It was not his rule to pass on his letters, and Stella instantly frightened herself into the terrifying belief he would expect her to do the same. Perhaps it was the fright that made her lose her head, for she hardly saw the words. She pretended to read. The panic sent her poor wits flying in all directions for shelter and she chose the worst available.

She made some excuse for fetching a handkerchief, and rose, taking her letter with her.

Adam glanced up quickly. He had seen the envelope, and seeing her face now decided that Mark had upset her, and frowned. He feared the truth!

"Has he been polite to you too?" he called out.

She stopped with her hand on the door.

"Who?"

"Mark."

She looked down at the letter—the Indian stamp was undeniable but the writing was not very obviously Mark's.

"Mine's not from Mark. It's from an old friend in India."

She rose to the situation she had created with consummate art, a small compunction at deceiving him chased by flying shapes of necessity, and all wrapped in a cloud of hate of Mark and a fear of Adam. The

sensations were to her shaking mind, instantaneous. They outpaced her now. She hung the fraction of a second on her steps, looking down at the letter. Then went into her room and reappeared almost at once with a handkerchief tucked into her dress and without the letter.

"Florrie's rigmarole will keep," she said. "She appears to have married! More coffee, Adam?"

She did it well. So well that Adam, who had been eating silently and had not looked up, did so now. She did not meet his eyes because she was intent on the coffee, but her face was placid. Not the least telltale glimpse of a blush. For a moment Adam's mind wavered. The thing was incredible. Was he mistaken? But his belief in the infallibility of his own eyesight was irreducible. He *knew* the letter was from Mark.

Therefore the inexplicable incident filled him with bewildered anger. He did not feel shame for her, but he was momentarily at least ashamed of her.

He finished his meal and rose hurriedly; told her his probable hour of return as usual and went.

Stella sat wondering dully if he had forgotten or intentionally omitted a good-bye kiss. She told herself now she must not get in a panic, that she must use her reason. Adam had had other letters. It was possible one may have worried him. It was any way incredible that he should not have believed her statement. She had done it quite well. She felt a thrill of indignation with him at the thought he might not have believed her. It was so—so unchivalrous of him! It was all Mark's fault. How she hated Mark! He was trying to ruin her happiness.

Tell Adam now? "Never! Never!"

She burnt this letter as she had burnt the former one, with vicious satisfaction.

All through the day disagreeable thoughts haunted

her. Suppose Adam really had not believed her? Her imagination at such an event shrouded itself behind a subtle fear. She told herself it was one of the cases when one had to be strong enough to deceive another for their own good. There were such cases; she had read of them in books. It would not be good for Adam to see Mark's letter, therefore she had to deceive him.

The comforting theory was ousted by a wish she had merely said Mark's letter was for her eyes only. She saw now that would have been the wise and simple course, or at least she saw it for a few minutes, but it was not a consoling thought, so she let it go.

She had really had to act on the spur of the moment and if she had said that, it would have made him suspicious. Perhaps if he had thought Mark had upset her he would have written to Mark angrily. So quickly did her subtle mind find cover for its subterfuge, cover and excuse.

But she was very miserable. She sat for a whole hour by the fire, gazing in front of her with big tearless eyes that took an agonised expression. There was all this long day of uncertainty to face, and still worse, Adam to face at the end of it.

She must do something.

An inspiration seized her.

She would ring up Madre and ask her to dinner. That would put Adam in a good temper and by the time Madre left, he would have forgotten.

She sprang up with this intention, and then recollected that Madre had gone down to Bath. How like Madre not to be there the one day she was wanted! Anyhow she would go out and buy things. It was the only panacea for her woes she could think of. She did not know her Mother had found the same panacea long years ago!

II

Meanwhile Adam went to Woolwich with stern anger in his heart and behind it a feeling so new to him that he had no name for it. It was dismay! The whole thing was to him so impossible. His conscience acquitted him of giving occasion for such a reprehensible course and he could feel nothing but blind indignation.

It was not till the morning was over—he sternly ousted the subject during his hours of duty—that he began to divide the weight of his anger.

Mark must have said something to upset Stella very greatly to reduce her to a lie.

Even then it was a considerable time before he arrived at the fact. Stella may have thought he would want to see the letter. Of course, if he had thought Mark had been brutal to her he would have wanted to see it. Mark hadn't a shadow of right to terrorise Stella in this way! The weight shifted quite perceptibly.

By the time he was free to return westward, the greater part of it rested on Mark's shoulders and the residue remaining to Stella was mixed with a little impatient contempt.

Anyhow it mustn't happen again. He made up his mind to that. It would be a disagreeable subject, of course, to tackle with Stella, but it had to be done. Adam was not given to shirking jobs because they were disagreeable.

Stella was out when he arrived, which gave him a momentary qualm, as it was so far without precedent. She had left a little pencil note, saying she had gone calling and would he ring for tea if he was back before she was, and that anyhow she would not be *late.*

It conveyed a sense of affection something in the nature of an olive branch. He ordered tea and about two minutes after she came in, looking rather white and tired and complaining of a headache.

He allowed her the restorative of tea, but once that was over he "rode straight for his fence." Headache or not, the matter was better settled to-night!

When she said she would go and take off her things he stopped her.

"Look here, Stella," he said quietly, "I want you to explain why you said that letter was not from Mark this morning?"

She had the sense to surrender instantly, and resist faint impulses towards accusations of prying on her correspondence. Besides, the letter was burnt and could do no harm now.

She began to cry.

"It wasn't a kind letter. I didn't want you to see it!"

"But, hang it all, Stella, have I ever asked to see your letters?"

She had made him feel uncomfortable and in the wrong, though his common sense supported him against mere sensation.

"I suppose he had upset you and you lost your head?" he went on gloomily. "Well look here, Stella, you mustn't do that again. I won't have it." His voice was a little harsher than he thought and she made no resistance to a rush of fear which read vague threats behind his really tolerant words.

"I didn't know what I was doing," she burst out with sudden passion. Her eyes were wholly pleading, and she stretched out tremulous hands. "Adam, I did not know really. I was just upset by what Mark said. He can be so brutal and he thought I had treated Mother badly. But I have been so miserable all day I felt you were thinking dreadful things of me. I

hardly know how I've kept going. Men are so frightening when they are angry!"

He was revolted at his own harshness. After all, women were made that way, afraid of things. He had been hardly less a brute than Mark. Perhaps she had made herself quite ill!

He went down on his knees beside her and soothed her, and though he did not denounce his own behaviour as cruel he conveyed to her the most poignant regret for frightening her. It was all his fault and Mark's—only she mustn't do it again!

And Stella promised she would not.

She lay on the sofa, a white fragile looking lily, all the evening, and he read to her and between whiles decided he would not after all write a piece of his mind to Mark as it might involve giving Stella away.

And he had Stella's promise it should not happen again.

III

Felicity had not written to Mark until after she had paid her first visit to the Prestons. She wrote, in fact, the same evening as that event, and though she pleaded guilty of neglecting his warning and wishes and did not spare herself reproach, yet there was a certain discountenancing of Mark's vaguely expressed fears which would not have been there if she had written from Corsica. She reasoned with some force against the quixote pride which would not let the world so much as suspect him of taking advantage of his friend. "All your friends know that you haven't and what does it matter what others think—while as to their not being suited—Heaven forbid we should attempt to sort our nearest and dearest into couples *according* to our own idea of their needs. They are

young, they have everything on their side, and Adam is the best of fellows."

Mark did not himself answer this for some time. He awaited the arrival of a letter from Stella by every mail, but none came. It was only when the "other woman" rallied him on his divided attention that he made up his mind what he would do.

What he did was to write to Felicity, and what she did on receipt of the letter was to go for a long solitary walk and thank Heaven the gay little party she was entertaining would disperse in the next two days and leave her free.

London was a very unattractive place to Felicity in May and she thought with almost a sensation of irritation that it seemed much farther off than it used to be. Also that it was a hot disagreeable journey. Still it had to be faced.

Consequently two days later she called on the Prestons and found Stella at home and charmed to see her.

Stella had certainly improved in looks and whether one liked her dress or not, one had to confess it personified her. She was clad in a wonderful rose-red gown that showed vividly against the dark panelling and tussore silk hangings. The jade necklace, for all its disquieting effect, *was* effective. The room was cool and shaded. The very flowers in it and the cushion cover seemed a foil to Stella's appearance. It was all emphatically a setting for her and it gave the impression of a setting of immense comfort.

After a few inquiries Felicity said frankly she had come up on purpose to see Stella.

The curious, hunted look that leapt to Stella's eyes shocked her. She made haste to assure her she bore no ill news, that she had only come because she had had a letter from Mark which made her think Stella wanted to consult her.

The frightened look changed to one of helpless, pas-

sionate resentment that was another shock. Stella made no attempt to hide it.

She had never answered Mark's letter. She argued to herself that so long as she did not answer it, he could not know whether she had told Adam or not, and would therefore do nothing. That he should have told Mrs. Crofton and have "set her on to hunt her—Stella—to his own ends" filled her not so much with indignation as with a sense of impotent helplessness in the hands of fate. She needed something or some one to turn to in this dilemma and it might as well be Mrs. Crofton as any one else!

"Mark is cruel," she cried with poignant distress. "Does he tell every one about me?"

And Felicity spent fifteen minutes soothing her and bringing her to a more reasonable frame of mind. Stella admitted that Mark had told her she should tell Adam her story, and that she didn't want to do so. It was all over and done with.

"You said yourself one should let the past be past!" she entreated, slipping from her chair to the floor at Felicity's knees and clasping her hands on her lap.

Felicity's mind leapt back to a summer evening at Bath six years ago.

"Well, what exactly does he want you to tell Adam, my dear?" she questioned at last.

"About that man, I suppose. I did tell you about it, didn't I?"

"Yes. You went to him and Mark brought you back."

Her voice was encouraging and sympathetic. There must be more to tell, she thought.

"You see, people in Pieceminster knew all about it. That's what made Mark and Mother so upset and horrified. I went to his rooms in London and his man was a Pieceminster man, so it got about."

"But I thought he was a married man?"

"YOU SAID YOURSELF ONE SHOULD LET THE PAST BE PAST," SHE ENTREATED

"Yes, but his wife was abroad ill. I think he was really quite fond of her. He wasn't at his rooms and I waited and waited till it was quite dark—and then Mark came!"

"And the man never came?"

"He came in just after Mark—at first they were horrid to each other and then they were both horrid to me!"

She shivered. Her white face looked strained and wretched under the recollection. Felicity realised she was relating an indelible experience exactly and without embroideries and she felt almost thankful.

"And that's all?"

Stella twisted her hands.

"Mark took me home—and I was very wretched and every one was horrible to me—and so—so I got ill. I hardly knew what I did. Nothing did me any good and then Mark heard of a doctor in Germany and insisted on my going there. I hated it—but he—I—got all right again."

Clearly a case of extreme hysteria treated in the first place injudiciously and necessitating strong measures later on. So Felicity summed it up.

"And now Mark wants you to tell Adam this?"

"I suppose so,"—her tone was the expression of extremest misery.

"I wonder why!" murmured Felicity, half to herself and knitting her brows. There seemed no reason in it to her at first sight.

Stella went on in her resentful way:

"I can't see why I should tell Adam. He would hate it all. He wouldn't understand—and the man did make love to me—and no one knew he was married. It wasn't my fault! I didn't do anything wrong except to go to see him to learn the truth when they all said things about him, because I didn't believe it! It was no wonder I got ill. You can't think how hor-

rid people were—just as if I had been a bad girl—I hadn't anything else to think of, so I got ill!"

Felicity's heart sickened at being brought face to face with the crass stupidity of a narrow little world that went on blindly making tragedies out of scant material that might be employed for better purposes. The wonder was not that Stella had been ill, but that she had ever shaken off the effects. The German doctor must have been a clever man.

"I shouldn't ever be ill like that again," went on Stella with the same dreary resentment. "I shouldn't be unhappy like that again. Why should Adam know anything about it?"

Yes, why? Felicity was asking herself that question. Her own common sense was all for letting ill alone, but there was Mark's insistent command. Perhaps the little scandal had been really widely spread. There was the man's side of it. She knew nothing about him and did not wish to know anything. There might be points there of which Stella knew nothing. Suppose the whole story might come to Adam some day in an exaggerated form? Yes, undoubtedly that was it.

Her hand caressed Stella's hair softly. There was protection and pity in her touch. She gauged fully the nervous overstrained nature, badly brought up, badly dealt with, and faced with an emotional crisis which instead of being minimised and rendered harmless had been exaggerated and stretched into outrageous proportions till it left no room for saner thought in the excitable brain. There was Stella with her passionate love of colour, of emotion, of comfort, flung back on herself at the precise moment when herself was the worst possible companion!

And now, Stella had her chance! She was married to as opposite a type as could be found. Virile, *sane, and* healthy. Here would be no subtle under-

standing of her, but Felicity felt no qualms. Chivalry would take the place of sympathy, and common sense the place of understanding.

After all, there might be something in Mark's insistence. It would not do for Adam to come across this same ugly little story in an exaggerated form later on. She thought, a little resentfully, that Mark might have written and told Adam himself and saved Stella the worry, but perhaps he had not felt entitled to do so. His letter to her had been most considerate towards his sister. He had merely said that there was something he thought Stella should tell Adam and that probably she had. If she hadn't would Madre back her up and give her the necessary moral support?

"You'll see the best way of telling him," Mark said. "Stella hasn't much backbone, but it's only fair to Adam to tell him. Once he knows, there will be an end to it. It would be his affair!"

She reconsidered the words. Clearly Mark was afraid of it coming to Adam's ears in a roundabout way, and if he had reason for this fear, he had reason for his insistence. Mark wasn't a man to make a fuss of trifles!

"I can't see why I should tell Adam," reiterated Stella. "It would be horrid."

"Yes, I know. But suppose he heard it all much exaggerated from some one else? Look here, Stella dear, shall I tell him? It's really not a serious matter though it seems so to you now. But I can tell him all you've told me quite simply and you need say nothing."

Stella twisted round towards her with her face aglow.

"Would you? If only you would, why that would end it. And you could write and tell Mark so, and tell him not to bother me any more over it. It really makes me feel ill. I daresay, Madre, you think I am

a coward. Veronica wouldn't behave like this, but it frightens me. Adam might get angry and I should lose my head."

"Nonsense, child! But I'll tell him. It's really better so. You'll soon grow braver and less afraid of things—living with Adam. You are bound to."

Stella shook her head.

"I don't see Adam much," she said dolefully. "He's away all day. I wish he'd give up the army and live in his own house."

"Stella, my dear," cried Felicity, horrified, "you mustn't wish that! It's terrible for a young man to be idle just because he's enough to live on, and Adam hasn't even a big estate to look after."

"But I'm not cut out for a soldier's wi .. You see, I don't much like the C. O.'s wife—nor Mrs. Rawlins—that's the major's wife. The only one I rather like is Mrs. Felton and Adam doesn't like her at all."

"Still, Adam can hardly give up his profession because you don't like his fellow officers' wives!"

"Then he may have to go abroad," went on Stella plaintively, ignoring this statement. "Perhaps to a bad climate."

"He hasn't got to go yet any way. And it might be to a good climate. Stella, you ought to be thankful every day that your husband has a profession and ambition to do well in it."

Felicity's voice was a little stern and Stella sighed.

"Sometimes I think he really cares more for his profession than he does for me!"

"Then put the thought out of your silly little head and try to remember that men want a great deal more in their lives than a woman! She may be the crown of it, but you can't have a crown without something to put it on."

It was not till Felicity was leaving that she made any more allusion to the purpose of her visit.

"I will tell Adam to-morrow and I have it all correctly, haven't I?"

Stella, who was standing by the window, half turned towards her and looked hard at the patch of sunlight on the carpet as one struggling with memory.

"Yes—I—think you have it all," she gave a perceptible pause. "I didn't tell you the man said he had always thought of me as a child and had no idea I had taken him seriously."

It was all perfectly convincing. The little pause, the little effort of memory, the little detail of something that hurt her pride cruelly! She glanced up and there was passionate gratitude in her eyes.

"Madre, I can never thank you enough!"

Felicity was a shade too conscious of the bigness of the eyes and the droop of her mouth and of something oddly unreal about her to feel quite happy at her gratitude. She wished again she could like Stella more.

"I am glad enough to help you, my dear. I always should be," she said with real truth. "And now, put all this from you, if there's nothing more you want me to say to Adam."

"Nothing at all," said Stella fervently.

IV

"Indeed, Adam, girls of that age are often rather foolish, especially if they have no one to guide them."

"I'm not blaming Stella," put in Adam gruffly as he walked up and down. "Of course her people never looked after her properly. I always knew that. What I want to know is what Mark did to that brute."

"I don't know in the least. I don't even know his name, nor do I want to, and you are not to ask Stella. It's all over and done with and she ought to be allowed to forget it. It accounts, of course, for Stella being

so—so inclined to take a gloomy view of things. She'll grow out of that if you help her, not if you remind her."

"I won't speak about it to her, poor girl—but Mark——"

"No, not to Mark either," said Felicity firmly. "I don't even know if he were right in wanting you to know at all. I can only suppose he thought you would hear it from some one else at Pieceminster—some sort of exaggerated account—but now you do know, for goodness' sake let it drop! The man's nothing to you or Stella. Don't let her think that you take it seriously. That's what has been the matter all through. She has been made to think it all such a profoundly important thing, whereas, rightly treated, it would have been nothing but an incident from which she might have gathered a little wisdom."

He yielded to her opinion after a little more struggle and owned grudgingly that he was at least glad he knew, as he'd have been furious to learn it from any one else.

"But it wouldn't have made any difference to your marriage if you had known."

She did not put it as a question, but a statement of fact. Nevertheless she most ardently desired an answer. He stopped short and regarded her with a puzzled frown.

"Difference? Of course not! It only shows how fearfully badly she wanted some one to look after her!"

"You like looking after people, Adam."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Some one has to—it's all in the day's work. If people behaved decently there wouldn't be the need. Anyhow, I hate seeing girls miserable and ill when there is no occasion. Stella was just made ill by worry, on your showing, which is absurd! If they are

kept happy and amused they wouldn't make all this fuss about votes!"

Which somewhat incoherent moralising was proof of the disturbance of his mind.

"Stella at all events is beginning to enjoy life, thanks to you."

"And I've done nothing but be decent to her!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "You see how right I am!"

Felicity broke into an unsteady little laugh and held out her hand.

"Oh, Adam, you dear boy!"

"Well, I must go now," he said hurriedly, having taken her hand with rather a shamefaced expression. "I daresay I've talked nonsense. Thanks for telling me, though. I think Mark might have done it himself and saved you trouble. Say good-bye to Veronica for me."

When he had gone Felicity straightened a footstool he had kicked aside in his first impatient anger, and then sat down by the open window. Dominic found her there in the dusk, looking a little white and tired. He made no allusion to Adam's visit, though he had learnt from Veronica in the morning that he was expected.

Dominic sat down near her. She owned she was tired. He was a little worried and puzzled at her excessive languor and disinclination to talk, but she seemed to take pleasure in his presence and to wish him to stay.

"I don't think Madre is well," he said to Veronica that night, and Veronica stopped brushing her hair, and stared at him.

"I don't think there is much the matter. She is just tired."

"Why is she tired?"

Veronica resumed her brushing.

"It was a hot journey up yesterday."

"She used not to mind hot journeys."

"She'll only say she is perfectly all right if I ask her."

"No, don't ask her," said Dominic hurriedly. "She hates that. I expect she worries too much over the Preston ménage."

"She must have some one to look after and worry over. At least I don't think she's really worried, Dominic. She's just interested in putting things straight."

"What's wrong?"

She laughed.

"How should I know? Oh, Dominic, Madre is quite used to looking after herself!"

"And others! I know that!" he retorted drily. "That's no reason why some one should not occasionally look after her."

"Some one does, I think!" She put her brush down and reached out to touch his arm. "It's so nice of you to care so for Madre. I don't know what I should have done if you had just regarded her as an ordinary mother-in-law!"

There was heartfelt feeling in her voice. She did, indeed, consider it a subject of immense congratulation that there was Dominic to look after Madre. But for him she would have had to be just the tiniest bit anxious herself. A reversal of rôles that she felt would have been no earthly good. Veronica regarded useless anxiety as little short of a crime.

Neither she nor Dominic would have found their slight anxiety relieved had they known that Felicity passed the night sitting up in a big armchair before the open window. She slept for short spells and laid awake for longer ones, watching the invisible hand of dawn steal night's veil in search of the coming day. She was not unhappy or worried nor did the night seem very long. She slept better like this than lying down

in bed with darkened windows. There was more air. But she took care to disarrange the bed clothes before the maid came in with her morning tea.

"I think camping out or a caravan would be the sort of thing for me," she thought as she dressed.

Just for a moment her memory began hovering round the door of a certain doctor in Harley Street, but was recalled with stern resolution.

A caravan to saunter along byways of Hampshire into the green depths of forest or to meander through the wide valleys and high uplands of Dorset to where the sea lapped against a solitary coast. It sounded restful. She did not want to return to Bath. Alexander was apt to ask questions and if people got fancying you were not well, why then sometimes you might get—not well!

To convict Felicity of sickness was almost akin of convicting her of sin. A matter of commiseration in others, but of scorn in herself.

The same objection which kept her from Bath held good here in Hampstead. Dominic was much too keen sighted and there was always an odd sense of fear in being too long confronted by the very real happiness of Veronica's home. She never allowed herself to face the fear or admit it candidly, but it was there.

A caravan and Dorset! Perhaps she might find a farm and later on Veronica and family would join her and perhaps Adam and Stella. She would go to Harrod's and enquire about a caravan that morning.

CHAPTER VIII

"It is the First Duty of a Friend to Stand by Us at Need"

I

For some time the Prestons' existence continued an even course. Stella had less shopping to do, but made more friends. She went out to occasional luncheon parties and to picture galleries, and now and then to a matinée. She did not see much of the regimental ladies, for Woolwich was a long way off but she saw more than Adam realised of one of them.

Adam soon became accustomed to the change in his life and as novelty presented no attractions to him, this was a desirable result. He continued to find the rooms all they wanted for comfort, the meals suitable, and Stella something more than an agreeable asset to life. Matrimony, indeed, afforded him just that spice of responsibility which life needed. He kept his promise to his colonel and never once did the distance from town interfere with regimental duties. He was so scrupulous about this that Stella was not too well pleased, but when she suggested they should live nearer Woolwich he negatived it at once. He said it wouldn't suit her and she would be dull. He did not add a more stringent reason, viz., that Mrs. Felton lived at Woolwich. He was sorry for Felton, who was a good sort, but he wasn't going to have his wife make friends with a woman like that! He could not, of course, say this to Stella. The utmost his code permitted him was

that he did not like Mrs. Felton and would rather Stella did not know her. Stella acquiesced outwardly. But nevertheless both Stella and Mrs. Felton frequently found themselves side by side at a matinée, and even lunching at the same place.

Adam generally asked Stella how she amused herself during the day, but he never made exhaustive enquiries or displayed curiosity beyond what courtesy demanded. He would have considered it the heights of discourtesy to do so. Anything she volunteered he was pleased to hear. She did not volunteer much.

Unlike Adam, Stella loved novelty, and was not at all pleased when it rubbed thin. She certainly became a little bored. Having no house or housekeeping cares, she was compelled to make her own employments. She passed a good deal of time in the Park, watching the passers-by and here too Mrs. Felton sometimes came. She was undoubtedly amusing, though Stella would wonder idly at times over her dulled skin and a certain tremulous movement of her hands. She began to get very jealous of Adam's work, and he to become more and more immersed in it. It was probably the inherited instinct of a business family, rather than pure personal ambition, which urged him on to master his profession with commendable thoroughness. He was soon noted amongst his seniors as a man who would go far. In another year he could go up for the staff college and was already working for that end. He frequently returned late from Woolwich, and even when back at normal time he worked fairly late into the night, though he was careful not to let his work encroach on what he considered Stella's legitimate due. He sat with her till ten and never spoke of work at all; after that he retreated into his own "den," and Stella went to bed. On Saturdays he would take her to a theatre and on Sundays they would motor down into the country to

various friends. It seemed to him a sane and pleasant arrangement of life, and it certainly never occurred to him that Stella could resent or find the shadow of a grievance out of it.

Towards the end of July, Stella began to look white and wan. She found London hot and airless. He could not take leave just then, indeed he wanted to save up leave for the hunting season. He proposed, therefore, to Stella, either to take a country cottage to which he could come for week-ends or that she should go to her mother for a visit.

The Bessingtons were with Felicity in Dorset and though Stella was invited to join them she had refused somewhat petulantly.

Reduced to choose between a cottage with comparative solitude or Pieceminster, she chose the latter with a sense of martyrdom which Adam really did not notice.

So he took her down to Pieceminster and stayed one night. Mrs. Forrester laid herself and her resources out to their full for the event. They had been down before once since their marriage, but the weather had been unpropitious and they had seen no one outside the Laurels but the family lawyer, Mr. Loftus, who had been asked to dine, and the rector who had made a point of calling to explain his good lady's inability to do so.

Stella intended this visit to be more of a success or a triumph. At least she intended so, until the actual arrival, when she became weakly hysterical with fatigue. Adam had to combat a feeling of exasperation both with her and Mrs. Forrester, whose methods he did not think calculated to help Stella to a steadier frame of mind.

He left the next morning before she was up.

The visit was not a success. Pieceminster had its *own standards* of conventions, and Stella had twice

flown in the face of them. The town called on Mrs. Adam Preston, but it maintained its dignified reserve before her slightly hostile attitude of secret triumph.

Stella had never forgotten or forgiven the treatment meted out to her in the past. She had resented for long years the half-pitying toleration that had been eventually accorded her. She had imagined slights and seen scorn even in small kindnesses, long after Pieceminster had graciously decided to pardon her first serious breach of decorum. But her marriage was another matter. There Pieceminster considered it had a legitimate grievance. These "hole in a corner" weddings reflected a sort of discredit on the town, besides depriving it of a possible show, and the town was prepared to be "standoffish" in consequence. A conciliatory attitude and a little tact on Stella's part would have smoothed this over easily, for without doubt Mrs. Adam Preston was a personage, and endued with plenty of this world's goods which Stella Forrester had not been. But Stella was neither tactful nor wise. She was just coldly complacent of her own good fortune and her own superiority to Pieceminster and its needs. People ceased to call and behind the Forresters' back they pitied "that poor Mr. Preston" and there were not wanting malicious tongues to put doubtful complexion on the whole affair.

Adam had taken advantage of Stella's supposed holiday to devote himself arduously to the study of tactics and his letters were brief and uncommunicative. Though here again he strictly adhered to what he considered Stella's due. He wrote every other day. Stella missed at every turn his daily little attentions and the sense of possessionship which was hers in his presence. She had wanted him to come with her, wanted to walk about Pieceminster and exhibit him to an admiring envious circle. Instead, she had to be

content to drive about with her mother in the carriage Adam had arranged to be at her disposal. She had no more, even less, to occupy her mind than in London, and she had in addition the hundred fretting little incidents that were not yet so far behind her as to have lost their power to irritate. Above all, she had her mother's continual stream of small wonders and surmises over their neighbours, over herself, over Mark, and in the latter case they were augmented by the fact that Mark had missed a mail! An unprecedented occurrence that she felt could only foreshadow dire calamity. The better cushions and best covers were allowed to remain in evidence. She made that much concession to "Mrs. Preston," but Stella caught her surreptitiously spreading newspapers over the chairs at night and protecting the table cover with a clean cloth when she herself was absent or likely to be absent for an hour or two.

It all jarred on Stella more than of old. Her own horizon had expanded and she saw a real sin against life in this worshipful care of material things. It was no longer merely a harmless fad of her mother's; it was the contemptible way of an old and silly woman for whom she had small respect and no affection.

In three weeks Stella found herself hating Pieceminster more than she hated it before her marriage, and she wrote to Adam, saying she could bear it no longer! Adam was just at that moment starting on manœuvres and he wrote her a sensible and kindly letter, saying he was sorry he could not come and make better arrangements for her, but that it was out of the question for him to do so just then. If she had any other friends she would like to go to she might do so as long as she did not overtire herself.

"I can do as I like so long as I don't bother him and interfere with his precious work," was Stella's *bitter comment* on this letter. She made no attempt

to find other friends or make other plans. If Adam did not mind her staying on there and getting ill—and he knew she had never been well at Pieceminster—well, she would stay on and if she got seriously ill, it was his lookout. Perhaps he would be sorry then he had cared more for his stupid work than for her!

Mrs. Forrester was quite aware of Stella's state of mind. She made her own explanation of it and watched Stella with furtive anxiety and interest but she made no attempt to gain her confidence or even to offer her the reasonable explanation for her restless irritation that she herself had found.

Mrs. Felton wrote to Stella and commiserated her on being shut up in a stupid country town. She said she had made her husband take her on manœuvres. It was true she was with him. The unfortunate Felton could not leave her alone with any safety for herself or his own peace of mind. Her letters were amusing and rather clever and Stella welcomed them as an echo of her late life, which in comparison with her present existence seemed to her a whirl of gaiety. Mrs. Forrester, seeing her interested in a letter, asked innocently who it was from, and Stella had replied sharply, it was from a friend. Afterwards, having so little to think of, she reconsidered her mother's question, and a sombre suspicion grew up in her mind. She knew that in corresponding with Mrs. Felton she was infringing to say the least, on Adam's wishes. Wishes which she was sure would be translated into commands if he knew of their intimacy. What if he suspected the same? Had for instance given her mother a hint with regard to her correspondence?

The utter absurdity of such a supposition with regard to Adam might have occurred to her in the saner, freer surroundings of her London life, but here, back in the old tortuous atmosphere, with its petty frictions, its tiny daily deceits, its small imagin-

ing subterfuges and cross purposes, all the old evil of her perverted imagination was uppermost again. The better side of her had not had long enough ascendency to hold its own.

Something in her manner of answering, in her way of half concealing the letter, had caught Mrs. Forrester's attention. She watched Stella with renewed interest. Her complete lack of understanding prevented her from knowing the harm her secretive curiosity had on her daughter.

Adam's next letter was full of his work. He made no allusions to Stella's late complaints, hoping they had settled themselves. At the end he made one remark, which was so outside his usual reticence with regard to others, that Stella was at pains to find some especial purpose in it.

"Poor Felton," wrote Adam, "has to bring his wife down here so as to keep an eye on her. I can't think why he does not send her to some home. It's a blessing they have no children. In his place I think I would kill her rather than risk that! Drink in a wretched, starved, uneducated creature of the streets is bad enough, but in a woman with everything she can want, of decent people, and with a decent husband like Felton, it's beyond words. He ought to shut her up!"

Which unusual and fierce expression of his feelings was wrung from him after a very unwilling participation in a desperate scene between Felton and his wife, in which he had been forced to exercise that physical force that Felton feared to use.

This communication had the odd and disastrous effect that there was born of it a fear of Adam. A fear of something she had never herself discovered in him. She bore with this new trouble for a few days and then wrote to Mrs. Crofton and ask if she might come to her until Adam should be ready to return to town.

II

Stanton's farm lay in a hollow of the rounded downs where they sweep down to the sea in roll after roll of green billows, ending in a steep fringe of gorse-covered country, mainly inhabited by rabbits, along which a disused military road formed the only means of communication with the outer world at the little village of Penard, where was at least a telegraph office and a shop, only two miles distant. The farm lay in a hollow facing southwest. It was swept by the sea air, and shaded near the house by an apple orchard. Eastward, over the shoulder of the Downs, was a little land-locked bay with a fringe of silver sand and safe bathing. Felicity had discovered the place on her caravan tour. The caravan now stood in the big wagon shed, for having found the place, she refused to abandon it and as soon as London got too insufferable, Veronica and Master Christopher joined her. Dominic took up some arrears of holidays and they passed happy idle weeks there, playing golf on an improvised links, fishing, with the few scattered fishing people of the solitary coast, bathing in the little bay, and entering into all the fierce interests of farm life, the birth of a calf, the staying of a plague of rats, the possible failure of roots after so dry a summer, the prospects of harvest, the troubles of sheep.

Here, in the peace and the sun, Felicity did forget the vague troubles that had started her on that caravan journey. Veronica asked nothing better these hot days than to play about the sand with Christopher, and Dominic and Felicity explored the neighbourhood in a car, and would spend long hours seated on the crest of the high Down, looking seaward, and talking of things above and things below, oblivious of time and of original intentions of a long walk. Sometimes Ve-

ronica joined them, but she was really happier on the sands with her son, or loitering about the sunny farm.

"Besides, it's a change for Dominic to talk to you instead of me," she said; "and it's a change for me to talk to Mrs. Croby—not that I would insinuate there is any comparison to be made!"

Dominic learnt more of Madre in these few weeks than he had known before. One day, lying on the green turf and facing the sea, Felicity had spoken of her married life. Spoke with that slow detached wonder that was her tribute to the years which had silently healed the wound her young life had received.

"I married before I understood where to look for happiness," she said dreamily. "I still fancied it lay in the pocket of circumstances, and *he* thought it lay in monotony. Also he thought of women as merely adjuncts to life—and he hated children. We could neither of us make allowances. I, because I was too young, and he because he was too old! And again I couldn't make the best of it as some girls might have done because I was looking for something bigger. I think if he had let me travel, left me free to go or come as I would—to live indeed—I should have got through. But he couldn't. It wasn't all his fault. I couldn't marry him if we had met now, but we might have been good friends. Chiefly what was wrong was that I was too young."

"Yet you let Veronica marry at eighteen."

She was silent a minute.

"Yes; it is different. Veronica is not like me—and it was—you!"

Her voice dropped the least bit in the world.

"I think she is quite happy, Madre."

She turned a glowing face to him.

"My only shadow is that she can never know her own good fortune!"

"I know mine."

Her eyes, as they turned seaward, were wistful. Was his fortune so great? Was there really no woman in the world who could have given him more than Veronica could give him? The treason of the thought scared her, yet she could not escape it. His next remark seemed like a hand of healing on her heart.

"I have Veronica—and you! That means—so long as Veronica is happy—your friendship!"

He smiled at her.

"Friendship is the best gift life has for us," she said.

He looked doubtful.

"Best gift?"

"Love *is* life," she answered quickly. "It is not addition, it is fulfilment of life.

He refused agreement, since so many must live with life unfulfilled, but his refusal was largely based on desire to make her go on talking.

"And what have I done to deserve both love and friendship?" he queried.

Whereupon she answered swiftly,

"The one follows the other. The more complete the life, the more abundant the gifts that follow it."

He shook his head unsatisfied and still desirous to press her to deeper reason. He got it by insistence.

"In friendship it is absolutely essential that one of the two should have working knowledge of love. The friendship is then an addition to this one, though possibly a necessity to the other."

"Mayn't it be necessary to both?"

She rose and held out her hands to feel the cool breeze fanning them.

"You are asking for logic and philosophy, and I can only give you instinctive answers that I have never thought out. Don't press me, Dominic."

He, too, had risen and stood bareheaded before her.

In a strange way they seemed to stand alone on the little green mound, nearer heaven than any spot in the surrounding earth, and the scent of the thyme and gorse rushed over him with a new power. It might almost be that for one second of time her keen perceptions had entered into his, and lifted them both to a wider and more sensitive plane of existence.

"I wasn't asking for logic," he said humbly. "I know better. I only wanted your intuition. I can find the logic for it myself."

But at that she turned to him with a quick gleam in her eyes that was almost fear.

"It's not worth your reasoning over. Let us go down. Veronica will want her bathe."

After this Felicity never spoke of her own affairs again, but spoke often of Dominic's. He told her his aims and difficulties, and she listened and advised, and sometimes ran counter to his own conclusions.

"Well, what does Veronica say?" she asked once after a small dispute.

He smiled back at her. She did not know that particular smile was hers alone. That it presupposed an infinity of understanding between them, even on the subject of Veronica herself.

"Veronica agrees with me," he said with a gravity that should have counteracted the smile. Whereon she laughed.

"Veronica is far wiser than I am. She knows what you want."

"And you what is good for me?"

"Possibly. No, I don't! It's all nonsense our knowing what's best for other people. They know or ought to know themselves."

"Now you are shelving responsibility."

"Why should I not—from you?"

He was all contrition and protested he had not meant to worry her.

Late that evening he went for a solitary walk over the Downs and tried to imagine what his mother would have been like, and whether she had resembled Madre in any way. But the only thing he could feel certain about was that Madre, dragged to the South African veldt to a life of hard work and solitude, would not have died from sheer misery of her surroundings and isolation. And as there was nothing profitable in thinking this he gave it up and decided he was lucky to have found a mother-in-law who—given an extra ten years or so—would have made him such an excellent mother.

Into the midst of all this blissful content there came Stella's letter, not so much asking for an invitation, as clutching at it.

Veronica sighed and offered innumerable reasons why Stella should be refused. Dominic made no comment. He just waited.

Felicity did indeed hesitate a whole morning. She was very loath to interrupt their happy time, but Stella's letter made her uneasy. There still lurked in her conscience the belief that if she had been less awake to her own comfort and more alive to Adam's interests, the marriage would never have taken place, and notwithstanding its present peaceful appearance Felicity never deluded herself into imagining it was the sort of marriage Adam ought to have made. In the end Stella was invited.

Dominic and family had after all only another week of holiday left them. Veronica would not hear of his returning to town without her, though it is quite possible that Stella's coming had something to do with this. Felicity was at all events to stay on till the middle of September. The manœuvres would be over by then, and perhaps Adam might be able to fetch Stella himself.

III

Felicity, like Mrs. Forrester, made her own diagnosis of what was the matter with Stella, but unlike Mrs. Forrester she at once approached Stella on the subject as one of congratulation and future joy. To her horror she found her remarks not only a revelation to her visitor but the cause of the utmost dismay. Stella protested that she did not in the least want a child and did not suppose that Adam did either. In fact, she was sure he didn't! He thought people lucky who hadn't any.

At the end of ten days, by dint of great patience and of unceasing pity and a quiet logical treatment of the situation, she had brought Stella to a more sensible frame of mind. At least, to resignation of coming events, and since Stella entirely refused to mention the matter to Adam, she wrote herself with Stella's grudging permission, to tell him.

As Felicity expected, Adam wrote back at once expressing his very real delight and begging Madre be with Stella all she could. "If I had known I don't think I would have let her go to Pieceminster," he said frankly. "Mrs. Forrester does not seem to me a very suitable person to be with Stella when she is naturally rather seedy and nervous," in which sentiment Felicity was one with him!

Adam wrote also to Stella, but she kept silence as to what he said, though she made no more remarks as to his dislike to a child.

It was on Felicity's advice that Adam agreed to keep on the same rooms and let Stella stay in town. He had thought it better for her to be in the country, but Felicity firmly resisted this and by the end of September she installed Stella again at 107 Marble Arch in a reasonably satisfied frame of mind and went away

to pay an overdue visit to some friends in Yorkshire, whose daughter was about to celebrate her "coming out."

It was a large and rather noisy party of young people, and whether it was that her late struggles with Stella had fatigued her more than she had known or whether that insidious trouble that her pleasant idle summer had momentarily put to rest saw fit to reassert itself, but Felicity for the first time did not enter into the prevailing gaiety with her usual zest. At first no one noticed it. When she was not with one set of the party, they took it for granted she was with the other, and it was some time before they discovered she was very often in her room in solitary state, "writing letters," she would say, but she posted very few. The youthful members of the party thought her very serious and complained, whereupon she made brave efforts to cancel the accusation. The elders thought her singularly absentminded and thoughtful and said amongst themselves, regretfully, that even Felicity Crofton was getting older! The trouble was that Felicity felt in herself not an atom older. Her will to share and enjoy life was as strong as ever. She continued to tell herself it was only a passing fatigue, since it had disappeared so completely in the summer. It could not really be anything so serious as she had been once warned. It might indeed be only nerves. The word applied to herself filled her with fine scorn.

Her thoughts turned wistfully to southern climes when winter loomed ahead, but she went down to Bath and stayed there quietly, much to her brother's surprise and content. She also hired a car and used it more than she expected to do.

At this juncture, two godchildren of hers, the Maughans, were left motherless. She went to their rescue for a few weeks till an aunt could be installed

and while there with them, made a plan which filled her and all concerned with much satisfaction.

In the early spring she was to go out to Bavano, take a villa there, and take in charge, not only these two godchildren but three other girls. The families concerned and Madre herself were soon making plans for a life of pleasant days and under the spell of it Felicity's elastic vitality welled up again and she became enthusiastic.

Both Bessington and Veronica were too pleased to find her taking a joy in movement again and in the future to grudge her proposed absence from England, though Bessington made one or two attempts to persuade her to take a second in command, in case the party proved too much for one to handle. Felicity scoffed at him.

"No divided authority!" she insisted. "I can manage my party and I mean to enjoy it. It's the nicest thing I have thought of since you took Veronica away, and I can't think why I haven't done it before."

They were to go in the middle of April. Felicity arranged to spend the intermediate time at Bath; perhaps she felt it would be easier to do nothing there than in London. She was still content with that negative programme, though of course matters would be very different once she was in Bavano! At the end of February this quiet interlude was broken into by a letter from Adam. Dimly she perceived that she had been waiting for it. That she had known at the back of her mind it would come, and that she was ready and prepared to act.

"Dear Madre:" (began the letter) "Could you possibly come and stay with us awhile? Stella ought to have some one with her and I do not want to ask her mother if you are available. Stella is, on the whole, keeping well, but lately she has been depressed and I am uneasy at leaving her so long alone each day. The

exam is so near that it is difficult for me to be with her as much as I should like. Still even if I were free it would be better for her to have a woman round. The baby is not expected till the beginning of April. It would mean an awful lot to me if you could take charge till then. My cousin, Jane Mitchen, would come no doubt, but she isn't a married woman and Stella doesn't know her so well as she knows you. It's very important that she should be kept cheerful and made to take exercise and have the right people about her and no one could be so right as you, if it's possibly to fit it in with your plans. If you can come on Wednesday I will meet you by the five-fifteen train.

Yours ever, ADAM."

She went, of course, on the day and by the train mentioned, with a fine disregard to her own arrangements and to her brother's great discomforture. When he remonstrated over what he called Adam's outrageous egoism that imagined all the world's interest centred on his wife and probable son, Felicity said steadily,

"I failed Adam once. I hope I shall never fail him again. They are young, Alexander, and we are old. Surely it's a very little thing for us to put our small plans aside to help them on?"

Alexander was too dismayed by one phrase in her speech to argue over this outrageous doctrine.

"Old! Felicity!" he gasped. "I'm old if you like, but you are a girl."

"I'm forty-two," she answered, looking at him with brave eyes that smiled. "Twenty-two years older than Veronica, nineteen years older than Adam, and twelve years older than Dominic."

Her brother looked away quickly. He had never quite got over his disappointment there, and he resented any reminder of its impossibility.

"Nonsense, nonsense," he repeated testily. "You

are as old as you feel or look. To me you are a child and I won't have you call yourself old. It's preposterous and it makes me out a Methuselah."

She only laughed and smoothed his still ample grey hair.

"I don't feel old. I am only facing facts. And anyhow I regard Adam as my own boy, and I shall stay and see him and Stella through this, even if it means putting off our start a week. You wouldn't mind it if he were your nephew really."

"He isn't. Adam's a good fellow and is going to reflect credit on me, but why do you care for him so much?"

She frowned in a puzzled way. There were a good many reasons, but none of them conclusive.

"I think firstly and mostly because he is so beautiful."

He pretended to be shocked and called her a pagan, whereon she nodded her head.

"Perhaps I am, in a sense, but I always see Spirit in matter. Is that paganism?"

"It's the antithesis," he grumbled. "Well, I suppose you will go. I daresay Adam's absurd child will be an ugly little girl and then where will you be?"

Felicity did not disclose to Alexander the real sense of pleasure she felt that Adam should turn to her so naturally for assistance; should indeed almost demand it as a right! She might well have been his mother from the calm way he accepted her response to his request.

He met her at the station as arranged, but was not very communicative. Felicity learnt more from his looks than his speech. It was not till they were nearly at the house that he brought himself to say what he clearly had meant to say all along.

"I don't want Stella to meet or see Mrs. Felton," he jerked out suddenly. "I don't suppose she will,

because we have had rather a row over it. I daresay is wasn't Stella's fault. But I can't let her be friends with that sort of woman, especially just now."

"What's the matter with her?"

"Drink," returned Adam curtly, and then with an air of relief he added, "It's all settled now, but it rather upset Stella at the time, and I only warned you because Mrs. Felton might try to call. He ought to put her in a home."

"Poor thing," sighed Felicity pityingly. "Can't anything be done?"

Adam shook his head. He was not without pity himself, but considered his first duty was to safeguard his wife. Felton must manage his own affairs.

They arrived at 107 Marble Arch to find the sitting-room in darkness, though some crushed-up cushions suggested recent occupation. There was no sign of books or work or any amusement and Adam frowned a little as he turned up the light.

Stella entered almost immediately. She greeted Felicity with cordiality and Adam with what looked to Felicity very much like conciliation. There was a little trace of effort in her voice, and from time to time she glanced at Adam across the tea tray in a sideway manner that worried Felicity. The longer she looked at Stella the more uneasy she became. There was an odd brightness in her eyes that went ill with the pallor of her face. Still her animation was quite marked. She was even witty and Adam was plainly pleased and showed her a marked tenderness that had no effect in lessening the watch she kept on him.

When tea was over he got up and said that "now Stella had some one with her he would go and work."

"But I don't mind being alone, Adam," she said. "I'm used to it."

He laughed and remarked that was all over now and left them.

When they were alone Stella first talked feverishly and seemed to keep a watch on the door. Presently she said abruptly, in a low voice:

"You see how it is? I hardly ever see him. He thinks of nothing but his work."

"I expect he has been giving you more time than he should spare with the exam ahead."

"I hate it!" Her voice lost its animation and became dull and lifeless.

Felicity refrained from argument and made an effort to turn the conversation into other channels, but Stella returned to the subject again and again, and behind all her foolish words there lurked that strange, half-veiled fear of her husband that shocked Felicity as something uncanny and phantastical.

At dinner-time she made some effort to put this fear away, and again talked well and was amusing. When Adam bade Felicity good-night (Stella had long since gone to bed), he said:

"I am most frightfully obliged to you for coming, Madre. Stella looks better already. She got so moped alone."

It was not till she was courting sleep that Felicity had a sharp warning that the journey, the long day and the anxiety had taken unexpected toll of her strength and that if Stella was likely to benefit from her visit she herself was most likely to reap a bad harvest.

Nevertheless she was down in time to see Adam off next morning. And he told her he felt like another man now she was in charge.

"Of course I shall stay," she murmured to herself, as she watched him start, "and, after all, there are no stairs here and there are at Bath."

IV

Felicity had undertaken many difficult tasks in her life, but at the end of a week she felt she had never put her hand to so formidable a one as the care of Adam's wife. The little fact of a bedroom on the ground floor and no stairs was a poor set-off against the continuous mental strain of contending with Stella's whims. Once Felicity was installed, Stella flung the whole responsibility of her well-being on her and declined to recognise any obligation on her part to restrain her own caprices. It is true she did not fight very hard for her own ends. She generally accepted Felicity's ruling with the resignation she considered due to circumstances. It was really easier to leave the direction of the day in another's hand than decide for herself; so even though she might wish to sleep when she should walk, go out when she should lie down, eat strange things when a plain diet was the order of the day, discuss clothes when she should be resting, she as a rule did none of these things, and yet continued to find life tolerable. But it meant perpetual wear and tear to Felicity, to which was coupled an unseen and incessant care for Adam himself—Adam, who with his really hard work needed good food, cheerful company, and no worries in his home. Felicity saw that his needs were granted him. He took to spending two nights a week at Woolwich, and reverted to his old habit of retreating to his den as soon as dinner was over and the barest courtesy permitted him. A visit to Stella in the morning before leaving, and two hours with them in the evening, including dinner, was practically all they saw of him, but he made it apparent in that time that his interest in his wife was not on a par with the shortness of their interviews. Stella had indeed become to him

something more than an exciting possession, or even a fragile treasure that needed his protection from the rough ways of a discourteous world. She was to be the mother of his child and nothing that was obtainable for the well-being of that child and herself must be withheld from her.

He faced the problem of fatherhood with a frankness that Felicity found admirable and a little pathetic. She realised it would be the strongest passion in his life.

He was firm on the subject of protecting Stella from her mother.

"Stella's inclined to fancies, herself," he said. "I don't want a faddy child. Get her to take plenty of exercise, Madre, and to take up some hobby. Doesn't she like sewing?"

Felicity kept back a smile.

"She can sew."

"Well, she ought to keep amused. I am not worried, though, now you are here. You are a brick, Madre!"

Madre was humbly grateful for his gratitude.

She kept her promise. As far as lay in her power, Adam should have the healthy normal offspring he wanted, but she had her misgivings over it. Stella was so entirely a person of moods.

What troubled Felicity was not the moods—she made generous allowance for them—but behind them lay something furtive and hidden, that Felicity alternately feared to explore and feared to ignore. Stella protested often her thankfulness at Felicity's presence, but the latter caught a note of insincerity in the words which would alternate with a pathetic clinging to her companion and a childish fear of being left alone.

Always there was that odd sense of watch on Adam. Sometimes she would sit through dinner, morose and irritable or pathetically tired and languid, then occa-

sionally these fits would be dispersed by what Felicity first thought was a valiant effort to conquer them. At such times Stella would be amazingly witty and amusing, but the intermittent successes were always succeeded by a fit of depression as soon as Adam had gone.

One evening, about an hour before dinner, Felicity went to her room and found her indulging in the forbidden luxury of strong black coffee. Stella sulked for fifteen minutes after Felicity's firm dismissal of the coffee, and then was seized with remorse and exasperating penitence. Declared she had felt abnormally sleepy and wanted to be awake when Adam returned. Felicity pointed out that Adam would rather have her sleepy than taking forbidden things.

Stella's eyes flickered strangely.

"You don't know," she said in a low voice. "If I were sleepy and stupid, Adam might get silly ideas into his head. He wouldn't be reasonable. He'd be angry, and I should be frightened. Adam could be awful if he were really angry."

"You and I have never seen him so," Felicity reminded her. "And certainly he would never be angry without a reason. You are the last person in the world to be afraid of him."

Yet there was very real fear in the glance that Stella flung towards the door.

"I *am* afraid," she persisted; "and I have seen him angry. He was angry about Mrs. Felton."

Felicity, remembering Adam's remarks on the subject, tried to turn the directions of Stella's thoughts.

"Well, obey orders, and don't take black coffee and don't let your imagination run away with you," she said cheerfully. "Are you going to change your dress?"

"I should die if he were really angry with me," Stella muttered unheedingly.

Felicity insisted on the subject of dress, and Stella was induced to change. The incident left an unpleasant impression on Felicity's mind. She found herself alert to catch sight of this extraordinary attitude of Stella's towards her husband that seemed founded on nothing substantial.

Yet her moods were not invariably contrary. When not engrossed in herself she was interesting, and at times betrayed an uncanny insight into other people's motives that took Felicity aback. Also she had an amusing faculty for endowing material things with personalities. She cared for things far more than she cared for people, and she had a precise knowledge of what she wanted that was trying to shopkeepers used to the facile nature of the majority of shoppers. She would show remarkable intuition in her shopping, electing perfectly unlikely places to unearth her needs, and invariably succeeding. Colour was a passion with her, and she liked it to suit her moods. Beauty in any form excited her oddly and her passionate admiration for her husband had root in his physical perfections rather than his character. But the admiration did form a link between her and Felicity.

Her occasional brilliancy at dinner seemed closely connected with the length of her rest in the afternoon, and in these flashes of intellectualism Felicity discovered she was better read than she had imagined, at least in modern literature.

At such times Adam, who quite frequently understood nothing of what she was saying, could not avoid displaying a little hint of pride to the visitor, as if he were inviting her to own he really was not quite such a fool as she had thought in selecting his wife. He, indeed, went so far as to express himself on the subject one day when alone with Madre.

"Stella has all the sorts of brains I haven't," he remarked; "so it ought to turn out very well."

His thoughts, even in consideration of Stella's brain power, never wandered long from the question of his prospective fatherhood.

V

One evening, when Adam was prepared to go off to work rather earlier than usual, Stella betrayed her annoyance openly. She turned away her head from his good-night caress and said petulantly:

"You are glad of a pretence to go."

Adam laughed. "I should be glad of a pretence to stay."

"Why should he want a pretence?" complained Stella, when he had gone.

"I expect if you were not well, or alone, his work would go to the wall."

"I'm not well!" she retorted sharply.

"Yes, you are! To be ill is to be abnormal, and there's nothing abnormal in your feeling tired to-night."

"Well, it's equivalent to saying he doesn't care for me unless something is the matter."

Some one besides Stella was tired that night before Stella's fatigue took her to bed. It was a relief to put the lights low, to open the windows wide to admit the air for which she craved. The rattle and roar of the streets outside was better than the laden stillness of the warm room. Her mind revolved uneasily over her own hasty definition of illness. It was, of course, hasty and faulty, yet in a dimly and unwilling way she began to fit it to conditions which seemed remotely concerned with her own personality.

One cold, sunless day Stella complained of headache, and nothing would induce her to go out, but she was most anxious that Felicity should do so, and proposed that she should go up to Hampstead to see Ve-

ronica. Felicity hesitated a while. She really did want to see her daughter, but she did not like leaving Stella so long alone. However, in the end, Stella prevailed. She promised to lie down and rest and Felicity left her comfortably installed on the sofa with instructions that she was not to be disturbed till tea time unless she rang.

Felicity went to Hampstead and had a happy afternoon with Veronica, who lodged vigorous objections to her mother's heartwhole abandonment of herself to the needs of the Preston *ménage*. She was even more exasperated with Adam than Alexander had been and less careful to say so, but Felicity only answered mildly:

"Well, my dear, if you had really wanted me for any reason it would have been another matter."

"We always want you," returned Veronica promptly.

"It's nice to be wanted."

"It's a pleasure in which you actually luxuriate. The best sort of Lenten penance for you would be to make yourself generally unpopular."

"But I don't keep Lent," her mother protested.

"That, of course, is deplorable. Unselfish people ought to have a close time to give others a chance."

"I'm not unselfish. Not more than other people."

"You are. Dominic says so."

"That is final, of course."

"Of course!" Veronica opened her blue eyes in surprise. "I thought you knew better than any one else how clever he was."

"I am not sure I have ever thought about his cleverness."

"You should certainly keep Lent to give yourself time to study other people's virtues."

"*Is* cleverness a virtue?" inquired Felicity meekly.

"In Dominic."

"Why this enthusiasm for Lent?"

"We went to church last Sunday. I really forget why. Dominic had no one to golf with, or else I had no letters to write, or we were both cross—I think it must have been that. So we went because, as we couldn't possibly be crosser, we were bound to be made more amiable. We came home in an angelic frame of mind. The sermon was all about Lent, and the preacher was so young that one wondered he had had time to learn so much. I nearly made up my mind to do without jam, and Dominic to do without a pipe—I believe he prefers cigarettes—but we got command of our senses before we reached home. I don't think young men like that, with persuasive tongues and good looks, ought to be allowed to stand up there and make people in the mood to make fools of themselves."

"Oh, my dear child!" laughed Felicity. "All the same it is not seemly for you to laugh at people who are in earnest."

Veronica objected that she did not know if he were in earnest or not.

"He might just be trying to find out how much he could sway our unstable minds. Let us forget him. It depresses me, Madre. Patricia Masters has offered to take in Christopher and Nurse in her own nursery if Dominic can get away in April so we can go abroad."

It sounded an ideal arrangement. Patricia's own babies wanted nothing that affection and money could obtain for them, and Stormly, despite its proximity to the Black Country, was healthy enough.

Felicity looked at the clock and said she must go. She said it with evident reluctance, which Veronica was not slow to point out to her as a reason for longer absence, but Felicity was firm. She said she felt

much refreshed, and promised to come again as soon as she could.

All the way back she kept her mind as much as possible on Veronica and her nonsense. Her gaiety had been a good tonic after Stella's mournful languor or rather stinging wit. She began to count up the weeks till she could start for Bavano and to reckon up the chance of Dominic and Veronica ending up their trip with her there. It would be new ground for Dominic and she longed to show it him.

Behind each thought and persistently dragging at her consciousness was a desire to get back to Stella, and a vague uneasiness to which she would not succumb. Even when she arrived and found the room deserted and the fire out she refused to allow her mind to leap to conclusions. She rang the bell for the maid to relight the fire, took off her things and then went to the door of Stella's room and knocked softly. There was no answer and a maid passing looked at her oddly as if she expected to be questioned. Felicity turned the handle and went in.

Stella was lying on the bed in a rest gown with loose sleeves. She seemed asleep and Felicity turned up the shaded light and looked at her.

It was heavy sleep, yet the eyes were not quite closed. There was something almost uncanny in her repose. It was so complete, so deep, so arresting. Felicity bent over her and touched her hand that lay on the gorgeous Japanese coverlet.

"Stella!" she called firmly.

There was not so much as the flicker of an eyelid. She pushed up the wide sleeve on the white arm, taking no precautions now not to rouse the sleeping girl. There, on the forearm, were three or four little black marks. Felicity let the sleeve fall and looked round the room. There was a glass of water on the table near the bed and a little china saucer—nothing else.

At least nothing that she was looking for. She put her hand under the pillows and felt something, drew it out and carried it to the light.

A hypodermic syringe and a small bottle of minute tablets, labelled: "Morphine. One to the dose."

Felicity put the things down and stood gazing at the senseless form. Wave after wave of explanations and understandings swept over her. This, then, was what Mark had known and feared; this, then, was the secret of that nervous illness, of the visit to the German doctor, and of Mark's letters. Stella had deceived her, though that troubled her little. She could not even think of Stella for the moment. Her whole thought was for Adam and for Adam's child. Her whole being was active towards protection. It was as if she must spread quivering wings between them and disaster. Then sharply she was aware that Stella herself must lie under that winged love. Not *from* her but with her must this small household of helpless, blundering souls be saved from the mastery of circumstance.

She went nearer the insensible form and was no longer repulsed by it. There was an indolent grace in Stella's attitude of complete repose, and Felicity rediscovered that the girl was beautiful and that her beauty showed even through the sombre depths of her ill-found sleep. It was to an understanding of Adam rather than Stella that she came, and it was with a little shock of surprise. She had only thought of the woman within, but Adam—she knew it now—had, indeed, been from the first aware only of the woman without. That Stella's rather exotic beauty should have touched him was one of the mysteries that no woman could fathom, but so it was, and therefore it was clear to Felicity that the inner woman, whom he must know some day, must be dragged back to the pedestal on which Adam fondly imagined she dwelt.

Stella's eyes opened slowly, seeing nothing; then a dull discontent crept into them. She moved her arm. Her hand stole towards the pillow, and stopped as she became conscious of Felicity's presence. She felt fretfully annoyed at it. Her eyes closed again.

"It's past tea time, Stella. Won't you wake?" said Felicity gently.

She herself wanted air, wanted it badly. She felt the room hot and close and pulled the curtains aside and opened the windows. The cold evening air rushed in, swept into corners, stirred the curtains, freshened the room.

"Why do you do that?" muttered Stella crossly. "I don't want to get up. Please shut it again."

Instead of doing so, Felicity put a rug over her and she immediately shut her eyes again.

Through a hazy mist of golden light, Felicity's voice sank down to her, calling, calling, slitting the haze mercilessly so that a veritable storm of fierce hate surged over her and yet found expression in mere weak tears and faint entreaties to be let alone.

"How much did you take, Stella?"

The question was gently and quietly put and yet the golden mist melted at it, leaving her alone in a terrifying discomfort and dumb misery.

She could not see the room, but she could see Felicity standing by the dressing table examining something in her hand. Something she must not see! Stella struggled up on her elbow.

"That's mine! You have no business to touch it!"

"If it had been Adam who——"

That was enough! Stella was whirled back to wakefulness and comprehension and terror—desperate terror.

She flung herself from the bed and on to the floor before Felicity, clutching at her and shaking and gasping.

"Don't tell him! Don't let him know, Madre! He'd shut me up! He'd kill me! He mustn't know! He mustn't! Say he's not coming, Madre!"

Felicity got her back on the tumbled bed, soothing her, holding her in her arms, and telling her again and again that Adam did not know and was not coming.

The paramount necessity was to calm her, and Felicity, knowing it, was hard put to achieve this and escape that promise of secrecy that Stella wildly pressed on her.

The most effectual argument was that unless she got command of herself Adam might return and demand explanations of her condition. Felicity knew quite well that the chance of Adam's return that night was small. It had been left in doubt that morning; he was to wire if he were coming, and no wire had arrived. But she lied bravely and by degrees she got Stella to take hold of herself.

She bathed her face and hands, and ordered tea, and insisted on Stella coming into the sitting-room. She talked of Veronica and Christopher and the merits of a new dressmaker that Veronica had found. Finally she told her it was now past seven and that as Adam had not wired he would not be returning. Whereupon Stella let go her hardly achieved control and began to cry. Later on she became irritable and cross to such a degree that when Felicity had once got her to bed again, she went to her own room and lay back in a chair with tears of weariness in her eyes. It was no use being tired. The problem had to be faced and settled. Was she to tell Adam and let him deal with it, or was she to tackle it herself?

There was only one answer. To put Adam in charge of such a case was like putting a child with a sick baby in charge of a cupboard full of medicines most of which were poisonous.

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VI

The next day, by dint of infinite patience and tact, she got the facts of the case from Stella, or at least the essential facts.

She had acquired the habit of taking drugs and acquired it badly in those miserable days following her youthful indiscretion. Mark had discovered it and it was Mark who had sent her to the doctor. Felicity was appalled to learn how easily she had obtained the drug at the cost of a little ingenious duplicity. The same methods had procured it for her now when under the stress of acute depression and physical disability her thoughts had again turned to the forbidden relief.

"I felt Adam was getting tired of my being so dull and stupid and it does brighten one up so," she moaned plaintively.

She seemed to have little sense of shame and her greatest concern was the keeping of the knowledge of her weakness from Adam. The very thought of his knowing threw her into a paroxysm of nervous hysteria the result of which threatened to bring disaster on Adam's hopes and Stella's own well-being. How much ground there was for her terror of her husband, Felicity could not determine. She knew, of course, that Adam would not willingly have hurt a hair of her head, and would have let himself be cut in pieces before endangering the life of his unborn child. Still, if he knew, he would have to deal with Stella one way or another, and Felicity was by no means sure he would hit on the right way. Stella founded her fear on the unhappy little passage of arms over Mrs. Felton. Adam had shown himself then hard and, to Stella's mind, horribly harsh over the matter. He had frightened her by his unswerving condemnation of

the unhappy woman and above all, by his pronounced conviction that Felton had better put her in a home. She retained strange, blurred terrors of her own sojourn with the German doctor, who, after all, had cured her, for though she had now slipped back into the intolerable habit, Felicity could see it had been almost a deliberate slipping back, and that far from making any effort to control herself, she had rather excited her own imagination and clutched at the spurious relief with mental satisfaction. She admitted she had been in the habit of taking one small dose for some time any evening when she had felt particularly dull and dispirited. That one tablet produced a feeling of exhilaration and cleared her brain, and that a second later on stilled the reacting depression, that three produced sleep and golden dreams, but that so far she had rarely exceeded one for fear of detection!

She had quite thought that when Felicity came she would no longer need the stuff, and yet had found her appetite for it grow with resistless force; though never till to-day had she ventured on a full dose.

"I took four," she confessed. "I wanted to make sure of sleep and I used to take more. Of course I shan't take it any more now—that is, if you don't tell Adam."

She turned haggard, anxious eyes on Felicity. It seemed to her quite simple to renounce it when the craving was not on her, and her insensibility to the enormity and strength of her weakness struck Felicity with forebodings. Could she really contend with the matter single-handed? Wasn't it her plain duty to tell Adam and leave the responsibility to him?

Stella with sharp penetration read the doubt in Felicity's mind and instantly the hysterical panic flashed out. She clung to her, entreating her to keep silence and at last Felicity put her back in a chair and gave in.

"Listen, Stella," she said firmly. "I am going to do what you ask, I promise you. I will not tell Adam at present. Not until you say I may. He *must* know ultimately, remember, but I will wait till you are stronger and your baby is born. Till then I will stay with you and help you all I can if you will do your part. Promise me, on your side, that you will tell me if ever—*when*ever—your thoughts turn to this dreadful thing. I can't hope now to make you see how dangerous it is, but you must believe you are endangering your life and your child's life. I have got your syringe and the bottle of tablets and I shall destroy them and then it must be done with."

"Darling, darling Madre!"

"But you quite understand that Adam must know later on, when you can see there is nothing to fear from him. I will tell him myself, if you wish."

"Yes, but only when I say so, Madre?"

"If you will promise on your side?"

"I will promise what you like if only you will be good to me."

"Then I promise and I never break my word, nor must you."

"Oh, Madre dear, if I had only had you always!"

"My dear, let us think of the future, not of the past. One thing more. Have you any more of those tablets?"

She looked at her straightly. Stella shot a quick glance at her and then looked away.

"No, really and truly no, Madre!"

She looked back into Felicity's eyes with rather a frightened air.

"That's all right. I believe you, Stella."

She took the syringe and little bottle away with her. Both must be destroyed at once. She could not feel safe till that was done.

Stella looked after her with an odd expression, and

when she had gone she rose and went to her secretaire, opened a drawer and took from it a little leather case. She stood with it in her hands for a moment, her eyes wandering furtively from it to the door and then to the fire. She had quite a strong desire to burn it, but not quite strong enough. Finally she deposited the case at the very back of a drawer in a little work table which stood between the windows. The drawer was deep and the table covered with a cloth. There was, however, no bottle of tablets with the case—Stella had been perfectly truthful in her answer to Felicity.

CHAPTER IX

"Now I Must Deceive My Friend or Shatter His Future."

I

THE days went on slowly. Stella clung to Felicity with real heart-whole sincerity, and Felicity watched her without seeming watching, and was for the most part satisfied that Stella was actually fighting any forbidden desire. She did her utmost to keep her amused, and succeeded in interesting her in the subject of old lace, which brought about excursions to various museums and quaint shops and the ransacking of libraries for books on the subject. It was an expensive hobby, but Adam made no objection. The essential thing was to keep Stella employed, and lace sounded to him a harmless and feminine habit. His real concern was Madre herself. He was uneasily conscious that she did not look so fit as she used to look, and that she too seemed always ready for rest, a state of being which he secretly thought only excusable in Stella. He met Bessington one day and asked him bluntly if he thought Madre was quite the thing.

Bessington said after a moment's hesitation that they both thought her unwell, but that she had refused to see a doctor and only laughed at them for fussing. He, however, took the first chance that offered to ask her if she did not find the Preston household too much of a job, and if she couldn't hurry up her preparations and get abroad.

"On the contrary," she answered. "I've just put off going for a week. I am going to see them through."

Both Dominic and Veronica remonstrated in vain, and Felicity gave up the habit of resting when Adam was at home.

She had taken the precaution to go to the shop where Stella had obtained her tablets and warned them that Mrs. Preston was not to be supplied. The head of the business, whom she saw, was sorry and concerned, but defended himself by saying the paper shown them was signed by a doctor. Felicity did not enter into particulars as to the authenticity of the signature, and having done this much to ensure Stella's safety, she felt more secure. She performed this little ceremony on one of the now rare occasions when she went out without Stella, and going home she went into her own chemist and bought something she required. She had the parcel in her hand when she went into Stella and left it on the table by mistake. Stella from where she sat, could, and did read the label with the chemist's name and Mrs. Crofton written on it.

The chemist lived quite near, she noticed.

Felicity's greatest triumph, however, was the arousing Stella to interest in the baby that would be hers. She had to combat an odd jealousy, for Stella was fully aware of the importance Adam already attached to his child as apart from herself, but still there actually was born in her heart an interest, and even pleasure, in the contemplation of something that would be so entirely her own possession!

This was not the attitude Felicity would have chosen to awake, but it was better than apathy, and betrayed an instinct for motherhood which might make all the difference in both her and Adam's future.

All this time Felicity was making the final preparations for her coming exodus to Italy, or rather,—for

her preparations as usual were almost automatic in their simplicity—assisting at the innumerable preparations and final arrangements which families less accustomed to foreign wanderings considered necessary. Felicity looked forward to this time with her dearly loved young people with an intensity that surprised herself. The thought of it coming daily nearer and nearer carried her over many hours of fatigue and strain. She felt how good would be the sane simple happiness, how amusing even the funny little squabbles between her house party after the *ménage* at Marble Arch, and if only Dominic and Veronica could join her, she felt the year would be one to count as a red-letter year, in spite of its inauspicious beginning.

The one evening just when she had felt lulled into real security, Stella betrayed an alarming vivacity at dinner which charmed Adam and left Felicity cold with dread. She asked no questions, knowing it to be useless, but she renewed her precautions and she ceased going to Hampstead, since it involved too long an absence.

II

One afternoon Adam returned early from Woolwich. He thought he had earned a holiday and intended dealing with some letters and then playing golf. Stella was resting and Madre not visible. It rather annoyed him, because she might have assisted him to find a missing letter which he felt sure he had left on the mantel-piece of his own room that morning. It was not there now and it looked suspiciously as if the room had been turned out, in which case he thought with despair the letter might be anywhere. Perhaps it had been carried into the sitting-room even. Having exhausted possibilities in his own den, he turned to the other room. It was not on the mantel-

piece there, and that too looked as if some one had had an access of tidiness. He turned over the contents of one or two drawers and sorted them carefully. They seemed mostly full of bits of strings, advertisements or needlework. The likelihood of the missing envelope being among them was remote, still there was a faint possibility that it might have got mixed up with some papers and tidied away here by either Stella or Felicity, or the maid. He hesitated a moment as to opening the secretaire till he remembered that Stella kept all her letters in a despatch box which was in her room, and that the pigeon holes here contained nothing of a private nature, nothing at all indeed but a few bills and writing paper. A small table covered with a cloth stood between the two windows. It was the last thing left to examine. It had only one drawer which he opened with no hope.

The drawer contained a book of Indian poems, some theatre programmes, a fan which he knew was Madre's, that seemed all, but he put his hand to the very back and found two other items, a little black leather case and a small white parcel, obviously the make up of a chemist. He stood a moment, looking at these things with an odd sense of irritation and dislike. There was something secret and furtive in their appearance there at the very back of the drawer. He opened the case. It contained a delicate little silver hypodermic syringe. His sense of irritation changed to sudden anger that was akin to fear. He tore open the white packet. It held a little bottle of minute white tablets which was labelled, "Morphine. One to a dose."

He stood gazing at them, with scornful wrath against some unknown creature of a habit for which he had nothing but contempt and sick loathing, then hearing a little gasp behind him, he turned and found himself face to face with Felicity.

"Give me that, please, Adam!"

She spoke very quietly, though there was a singing in her ears and a sense of incomplete personality that stifled her, and she held out her hand. But Adam gripped the accursed things he held yet more tightly, and spun round on her.

"Whose are they?" he demanded curtly.

She had only an instant of time for her decision, though her thoughts annihilated time. She faced in that instant her promise to Stella, the partial victory already gained, and the implied lies when the other syringe had been destroyed, and the new deception and the danger to Adam's child if his anger should even for a moment outrun his humanity. It all rushed across her mind, beclouding perhaps her judgment, leaving only one issue clear. Adam's child must be protected!

She held out her hand again.

"Give it to me please—it's mine."

He faced her, incredulous and dumfounded.

"It's morphine—drugs; it can't be yours."

She only reiterated her demand.

"Please give it me."

With him, too, the rush of thoughts spun through the clouded seconds, but his slower brain grappled with but one of these clamouring demands on his reason. Was this what was the matter with Madre? Her languor, her avoidance of him, her refusal to see a doctor. Was it all traceable to *this*—sickening—beastly—thing, and she was Madre, the woman he had respected and loved almost as his own mother, the woman to whose strong common sense he had confided the welfare of his wife and his unborn child!

She stood there, quietly demanding her belongings unashamed, almost undismayed.

Extreme horror, and passionate resentment at being *in some* way duped, struck him with a fierce gust of

"GIVE ME THAT, PLEASE, ADAM"

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anger. He struggled for words and found none, and all the while she stood there white faced and with eyes on his waiting for him to give her these—things!

He would never give them. It should never be in her power to say he had helped her even that futile step on the way to degradation. He swept her aside and into the heart of the fire he crammed the leather case and the little glass phial, crashed it down into the flame first with his heel, and then with a more effective poker.

Then he stood up and looked at her again.

She watched him with such approval in her eyes that it was well for her purpose he did not see her face too soon. She looked away indeed as he looked up and saw the white paper which had wrapped the phial lying on the floor. She picked it up mechanically and saw her own name inscribed on it.

For a second her resolution wavered before this proof of a new treachery and then with a ghost of a smile she handed it to Adam with the name uppermost.

He snatched it from her roughly, just scanned the writing, and flung it into the fire.

Then at last his anger found crippled expression.

"If I hadn't seen it myself I should not have believed it. Of course I know women do these things, but though there was clearly something wrong with you, I should never in my wildest thoughts have believed this!—and I had got you here to look after Stella! You might have easily refused—I haven't any real claim on you, but you came, came with this abominable thing with you to take care of an expectant mother! If I thought Stella knew—I——"

Felicity saw his clenched hand and the hard fierce look in his face, and for the first time she understood Stella's fear of him!

She put out her hands, shaking a little.

"Don't touch me, Adam. Stella does not suspect me for a moment!"

"She must have no chance of doing so. The shock alone would be awful and I can't have—it—near her or the child." He choked a little.

There was a little pause. His mind began roaming wildly towards relief and he caught at the possibility. "Are you ill, Madre? Is it because there is anything wrong?"

But she would not seize the plank of safety swept towards her grasp. She had not in the remotest way connected this cursed thing with herself. It had been a mere matter of words, but she recoiled from the recognition of physical illness, for her acceptance of this spelt disaster—defeat!

"No, I am not ill. There is nothing at all the matter," she gasped. Adam saw for the first time fear in the eyes of the woman whom he had thought honourable and faithful.

He turned away bitterly disappointed.

"It's a damned sickening business," he muttered.

Still not a vestige of fear or pity for her, though she stretched her senses to catch it behind his halting words. His wife and his child triumphed over affection and friendship of years, over the selfless devotion that he had never really recognised or even guessed at.

"What do you wish me to do?"

She was stunned and dazed now, at a loss to trace any sequence in the maddening situation, only half comprehending how it had all arisen, and still far from gripping the ultimate result for herself.

His mouth hardened.

"I can't have you with Stella."

"She cannot stay alone, Adam." She was surprised at her own firmness of tone.

"As soon as you find some one else to take charge of her I will go."

He thrust his hands into his pockets and walked to and fro. Her concern for Stella added fuel to his anger. She had deceived him, tricked him into regard, affection even. He hated thinking that he wanted her gone so he might forget. Forgetfulness was the best that could be!

"Jane Mitchen will come, no doubt. I will wire to her. Do you know I had a row with Stella not long ago to keep her from knowing a woman who drank—only drank, and I thought it beyond words. Oh, it's unspeakable."

"Don't let's speak of it then, Adam. Go and telephone to Miss Mitchen, but I will tell Stella myself that I am going away."

He was up in arms again, all for forbidding her access to Stella at all, but she met him steadily, or held to her point. She would see Stella and explain in her own way.

"I know how to tell her," she reiterated, "and you don't. You will upset her, and she must not be upset, it is vitally important. She is rather afraid of you, Adam, and more nervous than you think. Be careful with her. I am thinking of your child."

"So am I," he retorted grimly, "but you might have done so before."

"You had better go and wire, if she can come tonight I will leave at once."

He still hesitated. He wanted to say things, not angry things now. He was dimly conscious he should do something for her, but she seemed so undesirous of aid. If she had shown any signs of weakness or helplessness, he would have done something, though he knew not what, to blot over this black knowledge between them. But she needed nothing. She stood there, watching him with something in her face that

kept his anger awake—it was Bessington and Veronica's business after all! Stella must not know; on that point he was determined. But Madre would probably find the best excuse for going—she was clever enough at hiding things, it seemed!

If only she would not watch him with that odd patient smile, looking as if she wanted to take care of him. In another moment she would be making him sit down and getting him tea, comforting him for his ruined friendship. He made a big effort and went away without any more words.

Felicity stood still, till the closing of the hall door told her he had gone out. Then she sat down slowly, shivering a little with a curious fear in her eyes. She sat quite still for nearly ten minutes, and during that time she did not think consciously of what had happened. She observed that the window curtains had faded in stripes, that a picture was crooked, and that in another picture the girl was clad in a bizarre brocade of fantastic pattern, that made odd shapes, that the carpet also could be tortured into strange weird pictures to semblances of things that were nameless. Between these waves of disconnected thought, she measured pulse by pulse the slow faint beat of her heart, so faint she could hardly bear the strain of breathing at all. She measured that and the time that must elapse before she could walk across the room out into the corridor to her own room, and those little white tablets which would set this weary machinery going again—but they were not of morphine.

Then she must go and tell Stella.

Gradually the hazy nothings melted back into space and the real issues became clear again, and she faced them.

She first assured herself with great emphasis that if things had been as Adam believed them, his behaviour would have been clearly justified. It would

have been his first duty to turn her out, according to his way of looking at things. She had to make that concession to her reason. Still, the real question was not the rights and wrongs of Adam's action, but the result of it on Stella.

Would it not have been wiser to tell Adam the whole truth now, and trust to his love for Stella to curb the contempt and horror he had so abundantly lavished on her? Given time, he would of course see the necessity of this, but meanwhile the mischief might be done. It was with a stab of pain she felt she could not trust him, that she doubted his real capacity for dealing with the situation, his capacity for the love that suffereth all things. It would mean shipwreck to their chance of future happiness if she failed Stella, and probable disaster to the child. Even if she got him right away and made him see the matter as she saw it, he would betray himself to Stella. He could never play a part. Beside she had *promised* Stella.

That was the end of the matter. Unless Stella chose to tell Adam herself, she must let Adam go on thinking what he did till his child was born. No doubt after that Stella would be different.

Meanwhile Stella must be told. She dragged herself at last from the chair to her own room, and to the remedy that after all so much resembled in appearance that which had so aroused Adam's wrath.

Ten minutes later she entered Stella's room, and Stella rather fretfully complained that she was late.

III

Adam returned home about six o'clock. He had wired at five to say Cousin Jane would come round that very evening. He did his best to bring himself to an attitude of greater consideration for Madre,

determining to ask her to put herself into Bessington's hands. He was sure Bessington was quite fitted to deal with the terrible question. Meanwhile he must also make sure Stella did not communicate with her. What excuse had Madre made to her?

He had no opportunity of putting his consideration into practice. When he returned home he found a letter from Madre waiting for him. It was lying on the hall table, and he took it into his own room with a new sense of irritation.

The letter ran:

"Dear Adam:

"I have told Stella I am called away unexpectedly, and that your cousin was to take my place. She was rather upset at first, but no harm is done, and happily she seems to like Miss Mitchen. I think if she is not left alone she will be all right, but she must not be allowed to get depressed. I hope in spite of everything you will let me know how matters go off, and when your child is born, do not forget that what I told you as to Stella being frightened of you is perfectly true, but that it is only a passing state of mind which will vanish in the better days to come, only it must be encountered now, and given no shadow to feed on. Remember, you can be rather frightening.

"Yours ever, FELICITY."

That was all. No regret, no appeal for help, or demand on his forbearance. Above all, no demand for his silence. In a way that might have set him free to say what he would to Bessington, but Felicity had rightly gauged him. He would never give her away. The very fact of her silence on the subject would be more binding to his honour.

Bessington and Veronica must find out for themselves, unless she told them. After all, they knew she

was unwell! The most Adam could do was to impress on them the need of a doctor when he saw them. He would certainly do that.

He was again resentful of her solicitude for Stella, and her warnings. It was preposterous to make out that Stella feared him. He had never been anything but kind and considerate to his wife. She had not very much moral fibre, he knew, that was due to her upbringing—but on the whole he was inclined to think it was better for a woman to be rather weak, so one knew it necessary to take care, than like Madre, whom no one could have suspected of weakness!

It required rather an effort to go in and see Stella. She had obviously been crying, which made him angry, but she was also making excellent efforts to be cheerful. She insisted on pouring out tea herself, and it was she who attacked the news.

"Isn't it a nuisance Madre having to go? Just when I had got used to her. I hope Jane will be amusing."

"Where did Madre go to?"

"Hampstead, I suppose. I've seen ever such a nice house in *Country Life,* Adam."

She was not at all desirous of lingering over the subject of Madre, to Adam's great relief. Her interest was far more absorbed in the probable purchase of a country cottage, and she spent much time over agents' catalogues and *Country Life.* Adam flung himself into the subject with a zest that had hitherto been wanting.

IV

Stella went to bed early extremely tired out, but full of self-approval for her own sustaining of the part Felicity had left her to play. Adam really did not suspect her in the least, there was no reason why he should ever know, because she really meant to leave

off the dangerous habit. Felicity had at last impressed on her the salient point, that at this point of the proceedings she was really endangering her own life as well as her child's if she fell under the old habit again and she would not be able to depend on Jane Mitchen standing between her and Adam as Felicity had done. She did not in the least want to endanger her own life, and she had convinced herself that Adam would be quite ready to kill her or shut her up as a mad woman if he knew. She was very sorry for herself, and quite certain it was a case for pity rather than blame. She had been ill and miserable again, and sought refuge in the easy solace of those dreams, but that was a forbidden thought.

She was very grateful to Felicity. Any one would be; still it was just a little relief to be rid of her kind, if strict, care. Stella had suspected that Felicity did not quite trust her and felt the least bit aggrieved by it.

Jane Mitchen was quite different. She had thoroughly entered into the romance of Stella's wedding, and saw things from a really nice point of view, and she knew nothing of that little step back. Stella was, in fact, a little tired of being too well understood.

After all it was very stupid of Adam to think Madre would ever need to take morphia. She was far too ordinary and cheerful a person to even feel the temptation. She almost doubted indeed if Madre had a temperament at all, but Adam never understood those things. On the whole, it was just as well he was the least bit stupid!

V

"I'm rather surprised Mrs. Crofton has not been to see you or written," remarked Cousin Jane, industriously knitting a white shawl. "I thought you were such friends. At least I know Adam used to be, but

he seemed quite annoyed when I mentioned her at dinner."

"Adam doesn't care for her as much as he used to, I think. Men are changeable."

"Adam never used to be."

"Well, perhaps he thinks he has reason," returned Stella rather irritably. The subject of Mrs. Crofton was distasteful, but Cousin Jane never seemed aware of the fact, and returned to it again and again with provoking persistence.

"I had quite understood she was to stay with you all through."

"Well, she couldn't." Stella would have liked to stop her ears or scream.

"I suppose she is with the Bessingtons?"

"I don't know."

"We might drive up and call on them one day."

"I should detest driving so far, Jane. Will you 'phone to the library and ask if they have got that book yet?"

Two days later Jane Mitchen was again face to face with the subject which seriously interested her. Adam's few relations were of the feminine gender and they all shared a common interest over Adam's friendship with Mrs. Crofton. It was regarded with gratitude or dislike, according to the extent of their respective knowledge of that lady. Jane Mitchen had never met her, and had always been profoundly jealous of her. She was a well-meaning, kindly woman, with a strong ungratified maternal instinct, and she had always considered that if any one was to "mother" Adam, the matter should have been left to her, and not usurped by far too young a woman with a marriageable daughter. In her rather drab existence Felicity Crofton figured as too brightly coloured for general use. It would be far too strong a statement to say she was antagonistic to her, but her interest in

Mrs. Crofton was always tinged with disapproval. It would, however, be almost fair to say she would have been less interested if her disapproval had been less strong.

Though incapable of occupying her mind with big matters Jane could and did bestow concentrated attention on small occurrences, and the question of Mrs. Crofton's sudden desertion of Stella really occupied her mind. She knew it was sudden, from something the housemaid had let drop. People had a habit of letting drop varied items of news in Jane's presence, which she with great industry, swept up and sorted out for future use. Besides, Adam had been so curious about it. He had spoken quite shortly when she had mentioned Mrs. Crofton.

Then in Baker Street one evening about six o'clock she had met Mrs. Chancely and Mrs. Chancely had stopped her carriage and talked to Jane. She had been to call on the Bessingtons, and had found the house in the charge of a caretaker.

"They had all gone abroad," said Mrs. Chancely; "at least I gather the baby is with Patricia Masters."

"And Mrs. Crofton has gone with them?"

"No, I am sure not, because the caretaker,—it's old Ellen,—asked me if I knew where Mrs. Crofton was, as she had letters for her waiting to forward. Of course I couldn't say, but since I came away I remembered that she was with your cousins the Prestons."

"Oh, no, I'm staying with them. Mrs. Crofton has gone."

"That's odd; still I've no doubt Ellen will find out. Perhaps she has joined them after all."

Kind Mrs. Chancely drove off, leaving Jane Mitchen standing on the pavement with a little flutter of excitement in her breast. This was an item worth picking up. She carried it carefully home, and only displayed *it to Stella* after dinner. Adam was away that night

and Stella rather more restless and exacting than usual. Cross at Adam's absence, at the stupidity of libraries, and most of all upset by an injudicious letter from her mother.

"You are not amusing me to-night," she complained when dinner was over. Jane appeared to wake up suddenly.

"My dear, I am so sorry, but I was thinking over something I heard to-day. I daresay it's nothing, but still it was funny. I'll tell you."

The funniness of it appealed only to Miss Mitchen apparently, for Stella frowned. She spoke abruptly, following her own line of thoughts rather than her companion's.

"Perhaps she's never told them she's left us."

"But it would be so unnatural," exclaimed Miss Mitchen, quivering a little with interest. "Why should she not tell them?"

"I don't know," answered Stella, with an impatient shrug of her shoulders. "After all, why should she?"

"Her own daughter! I am sure, my dear, no one can call me curious, but really this does sound odd, and I am interested because Mrs. Crofton was such a great friend of Adam's, whatever you may say."

"I never said she wasn't—once. But Adam has got some silly idea into his head about her, and he's angry."

She got up and began a restless walk up and down the room. She was beginning to feel annoyed with Felicity for deserting her. She decided to-night that Madre was a more intelligent companion than Jane, and she was irritated with Jane for hanging upon a subject that she wanted to forget. She would go on harping on it, Stella was sure of that, unless she was stopped once for all. Adam should have told her; it was like him to leave it to her. She was the person who suffered most from Felicity's absence, and yet she

must find the means to stop Jane's maddening surmises.

"My dear. Ideas! But what sort of ideas? How strange!"

Stella flashed round on her, driven to a corner at last. Her eyes were a little wild and excited. She talked, but neither her mind or her outward attention was given to her words. She was talking like a woman in a dream, irresponsible and vaguely conscious of it.

"He thinks she takes drugs, which is of course absurd. Why should she? She's not unhappy or that sort of person. She doesn't feel things deeply, she's too cheerful, but when Adam gets an idea into his head, he's awful. He can't be turned from it. He just insisted she should go and never thought about me at all—and—and, Jane, I feel so queer, I'm frightened. I wish Adam would come home. Do telephone for him!"

Jane, who was after all a practical woman, telephoned for a doctor and nurse, and that amazing gleaning was put aside for many days. The next day Stella's child was born. It was a boy and healthy and strong enough to satisfy even Adam, but Stella was ill, very ill, and all day long messages came and went. The crucial hour in Adam and Stella's existence surged up into bare prominence—a detached point of time in a misty sea of uncounted days.

Adam, sitting by his son's cradle, began to reckon in his mind the worth of this thing that he had done, and found it of even bigger importance than he had imagined.

VI

About ten days after Stella's child was born, Jane Mitchen took her daily exercise in the Park with a *mind slightly* more at rest than it had been. Stella

was at least no worse, she was even a shade nearer the haven of "Better." Jane had got through her daily task of letters and wires and telephone news, paid her necessary visit to Mrs. Forrester (installed in the lodgings near by), and really fatigued with the strain of the passing days and her own share of routine work was little inclined to trudge round the Park in search of the needful air and exercise the nurse considered essential.

It was gratifying to feel she had been of real use, and that Adam would have got on badly without her, but it was most certainly a strain, and there were moments when she thought Mrs. Crofton had been fortunate in escaping all the trouble. It was a great pity she could not come back now and take her turn, for really Jane felt her own affairs would shortly need attention. She unpacked that very curious item of news that Stella had revealed on that fateful evening and thought it over. As she did so a Mrs. Dixon passed her, driving in solitary state, and suggested a drive. Jane was only too thankful and Mrs. Dixon being for the moment bored and having no other companion was thankful too. She was delighted to hear all she could about the Prestons, and Jane had plenty to say.

"It was fortunate for them you were there," remarked Mrs. Dixon, having heard a sufficient amount of news, "but I quite understood that Felicity Crofton was to see them through."

"So she was, and of course being a married woman it would have been much more suitable than myself, but Adam entreated me to come" (commanded would have been a better world.) "I did not like to refuse. Mrs. Crofton, you see,"—she hesitated, either because it was more effective or because she had some dim sense of responsibility—"Mrs. Crofton was not well, I think."

"Ah, so I heard," returned Mrs. Dixon. "Every one's saying she is not well, but no one knows what's the matter, I dare say. Say she's just getting old like the rest of us. But perhaps you have really heard?"

"What I heard was probably quite a mistake," Jane dropped her voice quite perceptibly. "Indeed it's so preposterous that it will be good to hear you contradict it. There seems to have been some idea of—*drugs.*"

Mrs. Dixon contradicted it promptly, that is to say she emphatically said, "Good Heavens! I can't believe that it's possible," which was of course a contradiction, and Jane looked relieved.

"That's what I think, it's just impossible, not at all likely, I am sure. Stella or Adam are quite mistaken, I shall always say so. I don't know Mrs. Crofton personally, though I've heard so much of her. She always sounds as if she were an unusual kind of woman, but that's all. But drugs! Oh, no, it's out of the question. Of course she has been seedy for a long time. So wrong of Adam, but I have always said, it's hard to get an idea into his head, but once there it sticks and it is equally hard to get it out again."

"Did he send her away?"

"I really know nothing," said Jane hurriedly and a little frightened. "I only mentioned it to you to have your contradiction to it. It's not a thing to repeat, of course, but I was sure you would think as I do. Look, there's the mounted police. Perhaps the Queen is coming by."

Mrs. Dixon eventually dropped Cousin Jane at Marble Arch, and as she crossed the road Jane said to herself:

"I feel much easier in my mind to find she thinks as I do. No, it's not a thing to talk about, even if it's untrue. The Merediths and Maughens would never be *letting* their girls go abroad with her if it were true.

I detest a tattler, but really Stella looked so odd that I wanted my own ideas confirmed."

Unfortunately she had sought the confirmation of the most notorious tattler in her circle, though to do her justice she was not aware of this.

CHAPTER X

"Is This Too Hard a Thing That I Ask of My Friend? That He Should Believe in Me Through Good and Ill Report?"

I

"You should have given us a little warning, Felicity, and then the house could have been properly ready."

Felicity readjusted a curtain restlessly. She was restless. She moved to and fro between the rooms, not in her old business-like way, leaving order behind her, but idly, beginning jobs and not finishing them, opening drawers and closing them. Then turning to the garden, she gazed at its rather tangled loveliness with unseeing eyes.

Alexander sat watching her now with growing uneasiness. Something was surely wrong, yet she had assured him all was well with Veronica and the family.

"I did not know I was coming till this morning."

She spoke absently and her vagueness irritated him. He had had a trying day and Felicity's evasiveness on the top of it got on his nerves.

"We should not expect more than a telegram," he began.

"There is no office and I forgot once I was in the train."

"No office!" he gasped. He was still under the impression she had come from London.

"Not nearer than Penard and I got a train there."

"I thought you were in London."

She still made no answer, but sat staring out of window. He was at last struck by the fact that she looked extremely tired.

"I thought you were with Adam."

She flashed round on him.

"I was not. I have left Adam, or rather, Adam would not have me there. He thinks I take—have taken to drugs!"

"Felicity, are you quite mad!"

"Not so mad as that to imagine that."

She looked him fixedly in the face now, with unswerving eyes and he could see she was speaking with an effort.

"He found a syringe and some morphine. I told him it was mine and he said in that case I couldn't look after Stella any longer."

"But was it yours?"

Alexander stared at her in complete bewilderment. For the moment he really did not believe that she knew what she was saying.

Still her voice was firm and her restlessness had ceased. She just stood there quietly looking at him, waiting apparently for some answer to her amazing statement.

"But was it yours?" he repeated, still bewildered and hardly able to see where question or answer would lead him.

"My name was on the packet!"

"But you don't take morphine?"

He said it slowly, incredulously, but questioningly.

She had been living on a strong hope, almost a certainty of hearing him break out quickly into anger at the incredible thing, and instead he questioned her! She shrunk back a little, not from him but from a sudden chill that gripped her heart.

"The Maughens and the Merediths heard it and be-

lieve it and they won't let their girls go to Bavano with me!"

She would give him no help at all. If he could not give her instant and unswerving faith, he could give her nothing. It was the only thing that could help her at this pass. But on the face of her bare statements he could not give it her. His judicial mind was summing up the facts of the case, rapidly, unhesitatingly, even against his own wishes.

"But who told them?"

"I don't know. Not Adam!"

That flashed from her in fierce defiance of coming criticism.

"Why do you take it?"

She caught her breath sharply. It had been a mistake then, coming here! She felt trapped and betrayed, and saw that she would need her wits about her to hold her own and her promise.

"Are you ill, Felicity?"

His voice was urgent and pleading, but behind it her sensitive ear caught the note of impatient amazement.

"No, no, I am not ill!"

The words burst from her with passionate protest. She still would not take refuge behind that cover. It lay too near the door of truth.

"Then for heaven's sake explain yourself!"

"What is there to explain? I have told you what has happened."

"Not why you take it."

She looked out of window again and her face became set and firm.

"I have no explanations whatever to offer."

He got up and began walking up and down the room.

"I can make nothing of this. There should be *nothing* to explain."

"The Maughens think there is."

"Then of course they are justified in not sending their girls with you. Older people might afford to disregard the thing, but one doesn't put one's children in care of a morphia taker."

Thus in his hot blind way he struck at her, or rather struck at something which he would not recognise as part of her. He was wrung with an intolerable sense of wrong that she, the well beloved, should so fail his thought of her.

"If I stayed here you would not want your boys to visit me?"

She asked it quietly, watching him with strange, detached interest.

"I should want to be sure——"

"Sure that I had given it up?"

She interrupted him with bitterness in her voice. It was a new note for her, but he did not heed it; he was quite vainly trying to get command of his own anger.

"In any case it could not be the same again for them."

She put out her hand as if to thrust the sentence from her and desisted.

"I am rather tired, Alexander. Will you go now?"

"You must have some one here. You can't stop alone."

"I have Mary."

"I mean a friend."

"Have I any?"

This time the bitterness got home to him so that he was startled back into his ordinary kind self again.

"You are overtired, Felicity."

"Yes. Please go, Alexander."

He still hesitated, but could find nothing to say short of unsaying all that had passed, and he was not yet ready to do that.

He went at last, reluctantly saying he would see her in the morning when they would both be better suited to talk things over. Felicity neither agreed nor disagreed. She did not rise to see him off, but sat still in her chair, listening till his footsteps died away, then for a short time other things died away too, as she had known they would do—and the bell was the far side of the fireplace.

Mary found her still sitting there presently, very cold, very silent, and on order brought her hot tea, hot bottles, and a little tube of tablets from her dressing bag.

II

Meanwhile Mr. Fraser went back to his house, troubled to the depths of his soul and puzzled beyond reason. The thing was so incomprehensible, even more so now he had time to consider it.

He kept thinking he was in some foolish dream, or that Felicity herself had made some fantastic mistake. If she had told her tale in any other manner, even if she had come in any other manner than that sudden descent on a shut-up house (and the gardener's wife with a washing day on hand) he would have scoffed at her story or even violently disbelieved it. But there was something in her maner of telling that left no room at the time for anything short of acceptance of the facts. She had flung them at him—that was the phrase he made for himself—flung them at him and left him to pick up his verdict as best he could. In thinking it over her whole attitude aggrieved him; for after all, once the facts were flung at him, what could he do but accept them? If they had been one shade more preposterous, if even they had framed an accusation that Felicity had taken to drink, to shop *lifting,* to gambling, he would have tossed them aside

and said she was playing an ill-timed joke on him. But this matter of drugs was so insidious. He knew what a widespread vice it had become, one so difficult to prove or refute, and there was always that persistent recollection of Felicity's languor and loss of energy of late. Of course if she had not been well that could be accounted for, but she had persisted she was not ill.

Again, for Adam to have done that he must have been very sure of his facts and if he had held his tongue some one else must have discovered it. He fought shy of this point. It hurt him strangely.

He began to wish he had not lost his temper with her and to hope he had not said anything too outrageous. She had taken him to task more than once for saying more than he meant to his boys. He tried to remember just what he had said and failed. He could as usual, only remember what he thought. Tomorrow anyhow he would talk to her differently. Perhaps she would offer some more reasonable account.

That was his last resolution that night. But when he went over to the Haven after breakfast the next morning, he was told that Mrs. Crofton had gone away by the early train and the place was to be shut up again. Alexander Fraser went back to his work with a heavy heart.

III

One morning Adam got a note from Bessington, saying that he was coming to see him before he started for Woolwich, that it was a very important matter, and he would be glad if Adam would make a point of waiting for him.

Stella was out of danger now, though still very ill, and Adam had resumed the old routine of life. There had been moments in the late hours of anxiety when

he had felt very bitterly the loss of Madre, but he had never thought of writing to her. As matters stood, her presence would have done nothing to restore to him the old confidence and reliability. He did not brood over the matter, but he was conscious of a streak of greyness in life and resented it; and the resentment overshadowed his transitory feeling of pity for her.

The note from Bessington led him to more concrete thinking on what had passed.

"I suppose they have learnt the truth," he thought gloomily. "I can't see how I can help. It's a miserable business."

He thought it lucky that Stella had never asked for Madre or even talked of her. He hated making excuse, and if Stella had pressed him would have been hard put to to find them. When she was quite strong he intended to tell her about it. It would be the safest way.

He had not to wait long for Bessington, who turned up at the time given and was shown straight into Adam's den.

He lost no time coming to the point.

"First of all I want to know where Madre is, Adam."

Adam looked and was amazed. He had heard nothing of the doubts of his Cousin Jane as to Mrs. Crofton's whereabouts.

"I thought she was with you. Her letters have all been sent on to Hampstead."

"I know," returned Bessington drily, "but we have been touring in Brittany for three weeks. We left on the second of April and as we were moving about did not expect letters. When we came back the day before yesterday the caretaker in great concern told us she had lost Mrs. Crofton's address, which she had sent her a postcard about ten days ago, saying her letters were to be forwarded to an address which the

woman can't remember and now she's lost the card after forwarding only one lot."

"Bath?" suggested Adam uneasily.

"She says no. It's old Ellen, and she knows most of our addresses."

Adam looked steadily out of the window. He was telling himself there was no need to be uneasy.

"When did she leave you?" demanded the other shortly.

"On the fourth. I did not know you were away."

"Very well. Leave that a moment. Now listen. I've something to tell you that you won't like hearing. You can say what you like after, but hear me out first."

Adam nodded. He never felt less like interrupting a man.

"We came home yesterday morning, having slept at Southampton. Veronica was rather disappointed at not finding a letter from Madre. There were letters forwarded for her from here, which puzzled us, and Ellen's story puzzled us still more. Veronica 'phoned down here and was answered by your cousin, I think, but she could not hear very clearly, only it was something about Madre being out. We expected a message from her all day, but none came. In the evening we were dining at Lady Losford's. We had come home specially for that. After dinner Lady Losford took me aside and told me a most scandalous rumour about Madre, which she said—and said rightly—must be stopped at once. I am on my way to her solicitors now, when I've seen you. The thing can't have gone very far in the time, but it's done mischief already, and if we can trace it back to the originator, we can make him or her pay for it. You'll probably be quite as angry as I am." He paused a moment, arrested by something in Adam's immovable face. "The long and short of it is, that some liar has started a report

that Madre has taken to drugs! Madre! It would be contemptible if it were not so mischievous, but the Maughens, hearing of it, made some excuse to stop their girls going out to Bavano with Madre and the Merediths and Drakes hearing that did the same. They all say it's preposterous—but that's what they *do!*"

He choked back his indignation with difficulty, and stood waiting to hear a fine explosion of wrath from Adam, but Adam sat still, staring rather sullenly at a piece of blank paper before him.

"The climax of the thing is," continued Bessington slowly, "that they say *you* sent her away from here because of this!"

Surely the explosion would come now! But there was no word at all.

"I am waiting to hear what you think." Bessington's voice was almost threatening.

"You can't take any steps, you can't go to a solicitor's," said Adam between clenched teeth, "because it's all true. Madre does take drugs and I did send her away from here because of Stella."

He got to his feet because Bessington was standing with clenched hands and a face blazing with passion. It struck Adam, through his dumb sense of misery, that he had never known that Bessington had a temper.

"Wait a minute, Bessington," he said hurriedly. "I found the things—tablets and a syringe—by chance, and she came in, saw them in my hand, and claimed them. I wouldn't have taken any one's word but her own—but there it was. They were hers, and she said so. I didn't give them to her, I burnt them. I sent for Jane Mitchen and she—Madre—went that night." His voice kept its dead level but with an effort. "Since then I haven't thought much about it or her. Perhaps you don't know that Stella has been, and is, very ill—it's a miracle that she is alive—and I have a son."

"I congratulate you. And having turned her out without even knowing where she was going, you spread this report?"

That fired him, and his anger blazed into flame quicker than Bessington's.

"What do you take me for? Because I had to protect my wife, do you think me a scoundrel? I might have written to you about it, but I couldn't even do that! It's all too sickening."

Bessington's face remained hard and unyielding.

"How many other people knew it?"

"None but she and I. She made some excuse to Stella about going away. She hadn't been well. I asked her if it were that and she said no."

"How do you suggest this lie got about?"

"It's not a lie," said Adam doggedly. "I wish to God it were. I've told no one."

He met the other's furious eyes defiantly.

"You suggest she told it against herself."

"I suggest nothing."

"You have known her longer—in your way—than I have," said Bessington with a cold steely quality in his voice that checked for the moment Adam's surging anger. "You can't help what you believe perhaps, but I know Madre as you never could know her and I know this is a lie and I should refuse to believe it even if she told me it were true. I must see about finding her now. I don't suppose that will interest you!"

He went towards the door, taking no notice of the other's outstretched hand.

The harness of civilization pressed hard on both of them for the moment. Even that might well have been too frail to hold their passion in decent bounds but for the presence of a sick woman in the house, and the reputation of an absent woman that both loved in their respected ways.

IV

Veronica was lying on the rug, pretending she was a horse for Christopher's benefit. Christopher thought she made a very good horse and called to his father as he entered for further appreciation.

As soon as she could rid herself of her small son, Veronica got to her knees to greet her husband and pulled him down to that level to do so.

"You are back very early, sir," she said with severity, and then after a glance at his face she picked up Christopher, rang the bell, and until nurse arrived went on talking of nothing in particular.

While the traces of his toy-strewn progress upstairs were being obliterated, Dominic continued standing by the fireplace, watching Veronica. Her deliberate sense of time values was always an amazement to him. She was without doubt extremely anxious to learn what had been the result of his morning mission, and why he had returned so early, but she would have considered nothing gained by mingling that information with her son's demands on her for rides and teddy bears and engines. She had, indeed, an instinctive dislike to mixing affairs, preferring to take life as it were in a series of watertight compartments and she liked to slip from one compartment to another in an orderly way. She shut the door, put a chair straight, and came back to her husband's side.

"Now, please." Her voice was steady and cheerful, but her eyes betrayed her.

He told her all that had passed between himself and Adam. He had meant to tell her calmly and judicially, but his anger broke in gusty bursts through his self-control.

Veronica sat gazing into the fire.

"I didn't think Adam was like that," she said in a low voice.

"Like what?"

"That he would ever turn on a woman—on Madre, in particular, whatever he believed of her."

"That he should even believe it!" he choked back his anger again.

She looked at him frowning.

"Why didn't Madre write and tell us?"

"Because she feared that we should be angry with Adam—and say something more than 'we never thought he would be like that,' Veronica!"

He spoke hotly. He wanted to kindle greater heat in her than this.

"Do you think that Madre is ill?"

"In what way? In Adam's sense? No! Veronica, how can you!"

"Can I what?"

She lifted her eyes and he saw at last the tears in them and the trouble breaking through the veil, and remembered how hard it was for her to express emotion of any kind.

"Oh, you don't believe it!" she cried and her face brightened. "Dominic, darling, you didn't say. How could I know?" She was distressed beyond words, and the tears, always so difficult to her, brimmed over.

Dominic sat by her and soothed her, and tried to forget that she was believing in her mother because he did.

"But where is she, and why doesn't she write?" she said at length.

"I spent the morning after I left Preston, telephoning and wiring. I've tried Bath. She's been there and gone again. I've been to her lawyer and to Bassai who is managing this Bavano business for her. I've sent to the Maughens, confound them! I beg your pardon, Veronica, but it's the mildest thing I can say!

They say they have not heard from her since they wrote saying that Alice and Millie were obliged to put off their visit. Obliged! And they had the effrontery to add they did hope that Madre was not annoyed!"

He walked up and down restlessly in fierce impatience.

"But you don't think there is any need to be anxious?" demanded Veronica with startled eyes.

"Veronica, think yourself, for heaven's sake! Where do you suppose she would go if she didn't want us to find her? Can't you know or feel?"

He put his hands on her shoulders and grasped her. It had become a paramount necessity to him for the moment to find in her some more intimate knowledge of her mother, some keener perception of her possible moods than he could himself offer.

She put her hands on his arms and looked in his face with pity.

"I think she would go to the sea or to some quiet big place. She would want to be alone if she were—worried. She always did!"

"Was there never any one to stand by her and help!" he groaned.

"I suppose not. I was never big enough." She was still looking into his face with great gravity and he let go his hold and drew her to him and kissed her.

"God forbid that you should ever be alone like that, my darling!"

She smiled back.

"We have you now. You are big enough for us both."

"But we haven't got her."

"Have you sent to Mrs. Croby?"

"No!"

"Wire there. She liked that place, Dominic."

He went out to wire, oddly comforted. Veronica's *refusal* to be moved to poignant anxiety had its ad-

vantages now that she had betrayed some insight into her mother's possible movements. It was absurd of him never to have thought of Staunton's Farm. He sent off the wire and a prepaid form for answer and went out with the intention of calling on Lady Losford, but when he got to the door he recognised the Merediths' carriage, waiting, whereupon he beat a retreat and went back to his rooms to wait for the answer to his wire.

Veronica's instinct proved right. Mrs. Croby wired back that Mrs. Crofton had been there for a week, but had left without saying where she was going. Dominic took the first available train and went down to interview Mrs. Croby. She had little information to give after all.

Mrs. Crofton had arrived without warning and asked her to put her up for a few days. She had done little but sit in the garden or on the shore. Mrs. Croby had not thought her looking well, but she seemed so put about at any suggestion of this, that Mrs. Croby had forbore further comment. Then one morning she had had a budget of letters, and on going in Mrs. Croby had found her sitting at the table, staring before her, evidently much upset. She said nothing, however, but went and stayed out on the Downs and stayed there all day, forgetful of meals. The next day she had spent on the sofa and looked so ill that Mrs. Croby had begged her see a doctor. She had refused and two days later had left them.

"She said she was going to see her own doctor in town, but she said it joking-like," finished Mrs. Croby doubtfully. "She only wrote one letter while she was here. That were to a doctor, though, for I remember Dr. Mathew was the name on the envelope, 'cause of it being same name as my old man. I give him the letter to post and I says to him, 'Don't thee go and take that to thyself, mind,' joking-like. That were the

only letter Mrs. Crofton wrote while she were here, far as I see."

Dominic went back to town still unsatisfied. He knew of no Dr. Mathew.

It was Veronica again who came to his aid.

"Dr. Mathew is the Prestons' doctor. Adam can find out that. I'll write and ask him, or rather 'phone."

He was much relieved. He was not sure that any question he could bring himself to put to Adam would be answered.

A note came from Adam in the evening to the effect that he had seen Dr. Mathew, who owned he had had a letter from Mrs. Crofton about a week ago, asking how Mrs. Preston was. She said she did not like to trouble Mr. Preston by writing, but would be grateful for news. The doctor, who had felt personally aggrieved at the loss of so eminently suitable a companion to his prospective patient, had replied at length and by return to Mrs. Crofton at Staunton's farm.

The only other clue they got was in the shape of a letter from Mr. Fraser and even that left them just where they were as far as present knowledge of Madre's movement went. It was the letter of a miserably repentant man and it implored them to use every means possible to trace Felicity and wire him her address and it ended with these words:

"It's a terrible thing, Dominic, to fail a living soul that turns to you for aid! If you can use me in your search for her, it would be an act of real mercy for I can never rest till I have assured her of my tardy belief in her."

He wrote as reassuring a letter as he could to Mr. Fraser, saying he had himself no fears for Madre's physical safety, and that he thought they had better wait a few days more before taking steps which she might resent later on.

CHAPTER XI

"An Understanding Between Two."

I

A FEW days later business took Bessington to the city and crossing St. Paul's Church Yard, he came face to face with Felicity coming down the steps of the Cathedral.

He could find nothing to say but "Well!" but he kept firm hold of her hand for a moment as if to make sure she was not again going to slip from knowledge and sight.

She looked at him with her accustomed friendly smile, but her eyes were oddly entreating. He could have sworn she was calling her courage to her aid to quell some hidden fear.

"I never imagined you came this way," she said lamely.

"I never imagined you did either," he returned gravely.

She looked up and down the crowded street nervously.

"I expect you are busy."

"Not so busy that I can not see you home."

He fancied she drew back, as if the fear had raised its head again.

"You don't suppose that having found you I am going to let you slip out of my sight again? I am coming with you."

"Very well—come!"

He caught again the note of courage, defying something—or some one!

"Perhaps you will come and lunch with me?"

It was so obviously an effort to say it, that he wanted to refuse, but the necessity of holding her in knowledge was too pressing.

"Yes, I'll come."

They turned and walked side by side along the crowded pavement. There was a flower girl at the corner where they took to the subway and Felicity stopped and bought some flowers.

"We must anyhow have flowers," she said dreamily.

"Only flowers for lunch?" he questioned, just to put things, to re-establish relations, on the best footing.

She looked at him with a little perplexed air.

"There is sure to be something in the house."

"Madre, dear, if I wasn't so horribly anxious to learn where you are hiding yourself I should take you off to the Savoy to celebrate our meeting."

"How is Veronica?" she asked, still with the air of holding him off.

He satisfied her on that point and they went on without speaking. Just when he was wondering whether she had taken to living on the house-tops or in a warehouse or underground they turned sharply into a narrow alley, passed through an iron gate and found themselves in a small square. It was surrounded by respectable houses of austere aspect, and they seemed mostly to be offices of respectable dignified firms that had drawn themselves away from the hustle and rush of modern business to this quiet haven where they might, unmolested, work out their quiet days in the sedate manner of their founders. Several windows supported window boxes and made already a brave show of early flowers. In the square itself lilacs were

putting on green leaves, fearless of the late frosts which assailed more exposed regions.

The sudden quiet, after the noise of the street, made their voices sound unnaturally loud. Bessington felt his own personality to be something too vital and too insistent for the self-effacement of this reticent place.

"The curate of St. Ambrose and his wife live at the corner house," said Felicity, doing the honours. "They are both most kind, but I fear I shall disappoint them. Mrs. Mears, with whom I lodge, is very kind, too. She is a Christian Scientist. I think I disappoint her too, but she is very cheerful, and good for one."

They crossed the corner and entered number 7. It was a small house, and the ground floor was occupied, according to evidence on the wire blinds, by Carey and Sons, accountants. There were three windows and two rooms on the first floor, and these had window boxes newly planted. These were Felicity's rooms.

She kept him waiting in the passage while she went to the head of the stairs leading to back regions to interview Mrs. Mears. Then returning she took him upstairs and into her own domain.

The room was panelled. It was sparsely furnished. The two narrow windows had window seats in them. There were a gate legged table, a book case, three chairs, one of which was an easy chair. There was a dim old painting of fruit on one wall, and on another an autotype of Rossetti's Annunciation. An old mirror hung over the mantel place and there was a faded eastern carpet on the floor. A few personal belongings in the shape of books and photographs and the inventory of the room was complete. Bessington took it all in swiftly. He knew she could not have been here long and yet already the quiet bare room seemed to have absorbed something of her personality, and he was immensely glad to be there. He sat in a win-

dow seat and watched her put her flowers into water. Something seemed to him wrong enough to disturb his content for a few moments, then he found out that the wrongness lay in the fact that she had drawn up a chair and sat down to do the flowers. She talked of them and of the plentiful supply in the city that season, and of the lilac bushes out in the Square, and he listened patiently and answered in a like vein. Having done her flowers she proceeded to lay the cloth, whereupon he rose and put her gently back in the easy chair.

"I shall not lunch with you unless I am allowed to lay my own cloth," he insisted; "you must have learnt from Veronica what an obstinate man I am, so please don't argue."

She laughed and protested she was quite willing to let him do it if he would desist when Mrs. Mears arrived with lunch.

"She protests against my waiting on myself, and I think she would be seriously hurt if my visitor did so."

Bessington conceived a liking for Mrs. Mears.

Luncheon when it came was neatly served, and Felicity made no apology for its simplicity. She also made no attempt to face the inevitable questions that must come, and Bessington respected her silence until he saw she had eaten some share of the little meal; then quietly putting aside an irrelevant remark he said:

"Why did you not send us your address, Madre?"

She looked down, crumbling her bread.

"I—I was going to send it."

"You did not even tell Mrs. Croby where you were going. We were very much worried."

She raised her eyes and looked at him beseechingly, but he was firm. He drew his chair nearer her and *took* her hand.

"Madre, you have been very unkind. What have we done that you should treat us like this? You have every right to go off by yourself and refuse to see us if you want to, but you have not the right to leave us without the means of learning even your address."

"I wanted to think."

"Should we stop you? Was it good for you thinking alone?"

She caught his hand in hers and held it firmly, and so found courage.

"Dominic, it wasn't, and it isn't a question of what's good for me. There are things I can't explain, and can't talk about yet. I couldn't bear seeing you and not speaking of them. I hoped—I am hoping every day, that it will be different, but until it is——" she stopped with a baffled air: what was the use of trying to explain when she couldn't explain!

He saw it must be plain speaking and rose to it.

"I have heard all sorts of foolish stupid things, Madre. I went to headquarters to get them explained, and heard a story I consider incredible and not worth repeating. If you could explain it, we should be glad, but if you can't we must be content to know there's a brutal sort of mistake somewhere, and wait till you choose to tell us more. Only you must not hide yourself away like this, as if it all really meant something."

She got to her feet and looked at him oddly.

"You mean you don't believe it?" Her voice shook.

He rose too. "Believe it? Oh, Madre! Of course I don't understand, and if you will have it so, must go on not understanding, but you don't think for a moment I believe it! Oh, Madre, Madre!"

For she suddenly broke into a fit of weeping, and he held her in his arms and felt there was relief in her tears. Also he noted that her hair was indeed streaked with grey, and that it was no trick of the light.

"Madre, couldn't you trust me?"

"There was no reason, Dominic. It was that partly —I couldn't bear to see you—believe it! So I ran away!"

She made a great effort and got back her self-command, and then stood clear of him and gave herself a little shake.

"I've been making a fool of myself. Don't tell Veronica, please, Dominic."

He would not tell Veronica, he assured her gravely.

"But I can't explain anything to you," she said suddenly, turning on him with that odd baffling look in her eyes again.

"We can wait till you can. When are you going abroad?"

Instantly she shrunk back as from a blow.

"I'm not going. I've given up the idea."

Not even to him could she own the deepness of the hurt that had been dealt her, and he recognised this and mercifully left it for the time being.

"Tell me how you came to this place."

"I knew Mrs. Mears years ago. She was a hospital nurse. She got landed, poor woman, at some little village in Switzerland where I was staying. She and her friend had saved up for years for the trip, and the friend got ill and died there, and Miss Boden —as she was then, was left alone with no one, knowing no French or German. I happened to be staying at the hotel."

Bessington nodded. It was all typical of Felicity's widespread meshes of friendship.

"She married Mr. Mears, who is a clerk in the office downstairs, and she looks after the place and lets these rooms. I have been to see her sometimes, and then—when, when I wanted time and quiet, I thought of this place, and luckily the rooms were to let, so I came."

"And you propose staying here?"

She looked away.

"For a time," her voice flattened slightly. "I want to be in London for a bit."

He made a note of this, but outwardly accepted it as an ordinary thing.

"We should love you to come to Hampstead," he suggested, though with little hope of getting her to agree.

"Please don't ask me just yet. I will come and see you—and Veronica. And will you go now please, Dominic? I am getting tired!"

The same words and same excuse she had used to her brother, but this time she was not quite soon enough. Her voice trailed off, and she lay back in her chair with shut eyes and white face, breathing strangely.

Dominic was for the moment quite terrified. For all he knew Madre might be dying. He pealed the bell, and then caught at a glass of water on the table and tried to give it her.

Little Mrs. Mears came hurrying in.

She went straight to the windows and flung both wide open, and then came back. She was quite collected, and seemed in no way surprised, which did much to restore Dominic's nerves.

"Another bad turn! Well, she hasn't had one for three days, so I suppose one mustn't grumble," she said, and while speaking she took a little bottle off the mantelpiece and poured some drops into the glass of water. She was so efficient and quick in her movement, so entirely controlled, that the visitor, watching her, was filled with gratitude.

"She will be all right directly," she said, looking at Bessington with comforting assurance. "It's just a bad habit, you know, she will get out of it!"

She nodded her head cheerfully, but Dominic, not-

ing the blueness of Madre's lips, and the laborious breathing, needed every bit of reassurance she could offer.

In a far shorter time than he had hoped possible, he and Madre were alone again. Her chair was drawn up by the open window, she was tucked round with rugs, evasive and apologetic as to her slight attack.

"I should have felt miserably ashamed if it had been any one but you, Dominic," she said; "but you won't tell people I'm ill, or get fussy."

"Not if you promise me to see a doctor."

She began rubbing her finger up and down the arm of the chair.

"I have been—seeing one," she admitted slowly. "For some time on and off!"

"And never told me?"

"It's nothing very serious. I have to be careful, that's all. My heart's got a bit too big, or something silly like that. Don't let's talk of it."

"What's your doctor's address?"

She told him reluctantly, and as he made a note of it he looked at her steadily, with reproachful eyes which she tried to evade. It was the name of a noted heart specialist in Harley street.

She watched him write it down with a little smile.

"It's no use, you know, Dominic, unless I send him word; you won't get any information out of him!"

"Then send it, Madre."

She sighed but gave in. He fetched her a card and she wrote something on it and handed it him.

Then he turned to talking of Veronica, of Christopher, and their late trip. She listened eagerly, but when he attempted to talk of mutual friends and future plans he noticed that she shrank back from it. He had to leave at last, but he extracted a promise from her that she would not again vanish from their ken without warning, and leave no address. Veronica was

to come to see her the next day and bring Christopher. At the very last, when he had his hand on the door, she stopped him.

"You won't tell Veronica anything more than that I am just taking things easy for a bit. It's only that, really; my heart will get all right in time: it's not worth bothering her about it."

He hesitated perceptibly, and she went on nervously and naïvely:

"There are such a lot of people ill in the world, and worried and bothered, and to me it's a dreadful thought that I'm added to all that. I like to keep my worries to myself."

He looked in her brave eyes and saw in a flash that it was courage and not cowardice that urged her to hide her mental and physical ills from the outside world. He knew himself strong enough to respect her desire, and he recognised her right, though he was aflame with admiration and sorrow for her needs.

"We'll keep them to ourselves," he answered gravely, and then left her.

Felicity, watching him from her window as he crossed the Square, knew he was going to Harley Street.

II

For the first time since she had received the Merediths' letter, with its carefully worded "postponement of arrangements," Felicity felt it possible to relax the strict hold she had kept on her thoughts, and even to permit herself to make careful reckonings of the future.

She knew that Stella was recovering. In a measurable distance of time she would be approachable, or would herself remember their bargain and set her free. It had all been quite clearly faced between them in that

stormy interview. Stella had promised with frantic sincerity to tell Adam directly she was strong again, and meanwhile Felicity promised to keep silence; and such was Felicity's trust in human nature that she extended it even to Stella's word.

But even when Adam knew, and she was free again from the suspicion she found so intolerable, she felt in her heart all would not be as before. The friends she had trusted had accepted mere hearsay evidence against her, and that had cut to the root of her being, at the happy companionship, the friendships, the charm of her comradeship with these young people in whom her interests were knitted up. She could not easily forget that they had believed it, not on circumstantial evidence, like Adam, but on the credit of rumour. . . .

Who had set that rumour about?

Adam knew, or thought he knew, and Stella knew actually. It must lie between the two. Yet Stella, knowing it to be a lie, could hardly have spread it abroad, since there was danger to herself in such a story. She did not and would not believe that Adam had spoken of it. That he should have gone to the Maughans, the Merediths, and Drakes and deliberately warned them that she—Felicity—was no longer a safe guardian for their children, was not possible. She told herself so again and again.

It must have been Stella; and yet if it were so what hope remained to her that Stella would abide by her promise of confession later on? To that hope however Felicity clung persistently.

She did one other thing that afternoon of import. She took out from their hiding place the letters she had received from the three defaulting families. The two first were polite and nervous in tone. The excuses offered were a bit laboured but they were excuses—a decent veiling of doubt. The Drake letter, on the contrary, was quite different in tone. Mr. Drake was a

rabid teetotaler, and had already been in conflict with Felicity on the score of no native wines for his daughter, in spite of her insistence that they were far safer than the water of the neighbourhood. He wrote now bluntly that he had heard something which made him determine to cancel his daughter's promised visit to Italy with Mrs. Crofton unless she could offer a reason for the rumour; that he was willing to meet her and hear any explanation, and if it were founded on fact to give her the best assistance in his power; and that if it were, as he hoped, unfounded, he would be thankful to apologise.

Felicity had not answered this letter. She had only sent a mere note of regret to the others; but the hurt had gone deep, and her instinct had been to conceal it till she could face the world with a clean slate, or with decent courage to veil her wound.

In those first cruel days, when she had sought refuge at Staunton's Farm her one real fear had been of seeing Dominic and of reading in his eyes what she had read in Adam's. If a comforting doubt of this surged up in her, she was confronted with the alternative of acknowledging that Adam had behaved badly, and that Dominic's wrath would be directed against him. Through everything she made piteous attempts to keep hold of her belief that Adam had only acted in a reasonable way. In those first days it had really only seemed to her a question of waiting in retirement till Stella should be ready to clear her in her husband's eyes, and that no one else need be concerned. Then had come these letters, which put a totally different aspect on affairs. It no longer meant just waiting till she could explain matters to Adam. Any explanation would need long steps to overtake a rumour with so great a start, it meant a readjustment of friendships and values, of ways of living and future plans. Moreover, since Dominic and Veronica were now bound to

hear of it, there was the dreadful position of facing them with no defence possible. It was that which had driven her to Bath in the hope that her brother would prove a tower of refuge—and he had failed her.

If he could offer nothing better than impatient anger and credit to rumour, he who had known her from birth, how could she expect better things at Dominic's hands?

Before that thought she had fled to London and to this retreat. Time, she felt, must be on her side. The only way out, that had never occurred to her, was to break her promise to Stella.

She had seen Dominic, and he, without explanation, had refused to believe the ugly story. And Veronica would in that case refuse to believe it too! But what did he think, since he had heard Adam's version? She could not fathom that. He was good at getting to the root of things. Suppose he made a guess? Would he too hold silence?

There was quite a real danger that if he guessed he would tell. Felicity decided that she must not see too much of him or Veronica. But meanwhile the world was a much better place to live in than she had lately fancied, and since it was a mistake to keep in touch with things that hurt, one by one she dropped the letters into the fire.

III

Dominic saw the Harley Street doctor with difficulty. Nothing short of the little message Felicity had scribbled on the card would have conjured him to so unprofessional a course as taking a third person into his confidence respecting a patient. He, however, summed up Dominic Bessington in two minutes, and presently confessed he was not sorry that Mrs. Crofton

had at last taken his advice and confided in her family.

"That's just what she has not done," returned Bessington drily! "I have come to you to learn what is really wrong."

Shorn of technicalities the story he heard was that Madre had heart trouble of a certain nature, that the original enlargement had probably been caused by some great physical strain, though he could never get her to confess what she had done; that it was the sort of mischief that might lie dormant for years and wake at slight provocation; that she should avoid any physical fatigue or worry or mental strain of any kind.

"She has been taking care of an invalid lately, I gather," said the doctor curtly; "that's very bad for her. If she will do foolish things like that she will suffer. If she will only be reasonable, there is no reason why she shouldn't live as long as any one else. Every one dies of heart failure in the end, you know, however it's brought about; but much fewer people die of heart disease than the public think. Mrs. Crofton has a splendid constitution and if she is sensible she will do all right."

"What do you mean by sensible?"

The doctor eyed him curiously.

"Lives a steady even life without big excitements or too much exercise. Does not knock about the world so much, or get so interested in other people's affairs. In short if she becomes decently selfish."

"You think that a simple prescription?" Bessington spoke bitterly.

"No, I think it nearly an impossible one—for her. I am only advising you how she can prolong her life, humanly speaking, not how she can enjoy it."

"It's mere existing instead of living."

"Yes, to her."

"I think my mother-in-law would prefer to live."

"I have no doubt of it. She is that kind of woman.

The question is, can we spare her type before we need?"

Bessington flashed round on him.

"That is to enjoin selfishness on us all!"

"You think it amounts to that?"

"I am sure of it. But I shall do my best to see your prescription is carried out."

"I am thankful to hear it. She is a difficult patient."

"You must not let her hear you call her that."

"There would be fewer of us living in Harley Street if all the world thought as she does," the doctor retorted.

Bessington left him satisfied as to his suitability as a doctor for Madre, but sick at heart at the news he had gathered. It had been in his mind to ask the doctor straight out if he had ever prescribed morphine for Mrs. Crofton, but some loyalty to her locked his lips. The secret, if secret there was, was hers; he must be satisfied for the present.

In one thing he felt Madre was quite right. There was no need to worry Veronica over it. He was quite one with her in her idea of sparing Veronica possible trouble.

IV

The weeks wore away. Spring merged into summer, and London flouted its brilliance in the face of the sun, and faded away into a dreary desert of hot bricks and airless regions. The Prestons took a house at Camberley, for Adam passed his exam with decent success. Here, in a large and well-cared-for garden Stella and her baby made rapid progress towards the very reasonable ideal that Adam entertained for them. The child was not particularly strong, but there was nothing wrong that science and care could not put *right*, and Adam saw to it that both were given un-

sparingly. Except for one dark disquieting thought he was extremely happy. He had climbed another step on his ladder of success; he had a son, and Stella was fast forgetting that wayward "delicacy" that had first invited his interest in her.

Stella indeed was changed materially by the birth of her child. The instinct of possession rose rampant in her. She adored her house (it was her first personal home), her baby and her husband. She possessed them all! They were hers, as nothing had been hers all her life. It was an expansion of her own personality, rather than an additional enlargement of existence, and in that expansion, her poorly developed soul found room to breathe and sustenance for growth. It was like a plant that had been repotted, rather than the vigorous growth of untrammelled freedom! still it was growth, and the sense of happiness and security gained ground. That strange fear of Adam was not obliterated, but it was buried. She put away from her with new found resolution all thoughts of those black days in the rooms at Marble Arch. What had happened there never could or should happen here, in this new world of good things. It had been but a momentary madness, produced by circumstances. It had really nothing to do with her, Stella Preston, and it might have happened to any woman.

These thoughts did occasionally filter through her mind, but she turned from them as quickly as she could. If in the dim recesses of her mind a quiet, grey figure stood watching her—and waiting, she averted her eyes sharply. She was not going to face it—yet! Just at first the memory of her promise did trouble her, but little by little she substituted for it the reasonableness of getting "strong first." This was a process that might take just so long as she chose, and meanwhile, as Felicity never wrote and never came, she chose to interpret her silence as consenting to this

wait. She did not start out with the intention of repudiating it entirely.

And she gave Adam what he wanted, or imagined he wanted in life! He found no limitation in her aspect of motherhood. Her beauty grew with her health, and the passion and colour of her nature, set in sane and beautiful surroundings, stirred unimagined emotions hitherto locked in his soul, which would otherwise have perished from inanition. So the days sped on and to the one of them, the grey waiting figure grew more indistinct, and to the other the grey memory was just one of the shadows, which life trails behind whether we will or no, and which Time in turn gathers up and folds away.

V

Through these long days and hot months, Felicity still clung to her quiet square, and remote life. At first, after Dominic's visit, she had to combat a new access of restlessness, but once fought off, it did not reoccur. In spite of Veronica's protests she stayed there all the summer, declaring her rooms were cool and quiet, and that she saw no reason for moving.

Veronica, in despair, faced Dominic with the problem one evening when she had spent the day with her mother.

"She declared she will not move, and that the thought of a train makes her tired! Oh, Dominic, what can have happened to her!"

Veronica's face was tragic, and the look so ill fitted it, that he was in haste to smooth it out.

"I can't see why she shouldn't be allowed to remain quiet if she wants to. After all, Veronica, she has travelled about three times as much as most people."

"But the City all the summer!"

"Madre doesn't take her beliefs second hand. If she found the City unbearable she would come away."

"I didn't think you would support her."

"I think she has a perfect right to do as she likes."

"To do even foolish things?"

"Why not? If it pleases her? Are children to have the monopoly of foolishness? Madre's whim doesn't hurt any one else. I mayn't think it wise but I've no sort of right to prevent her indulging it if she likes."

"You wouldn't let me be foolish, however much I wanted to," she retorted with a smile twitching her lips.

"No, that's quite different. You belong to me. If you were foolish I should be involved."

"Egoist!" Then she saw he was laughing at her and harped back to the original subject.

"But Madre doesn't look well."

"I've told you the doctor says the best thing she can do is to be quiet."

Veronica gave a little sigh which was largely of content: it was as usual comforting to feel Dominic was not troubled over her mother's aberration. She could now dismiss it from her mind with a good conscience, and there were so many nice things to think about.

Dominic watched her face clear with satisfaction. How right Madre was! It was undoubtedly Veronica's rôle in life to look happy. To see her face clouded was like seeing the sun shrink behind a cloud.

They discussed their own postponed summer holiday. They had been going to Norway, but not only was it too late for that, but Dominic had determined that Madre must not be left alone for any indefinite period. Veronica thought it a good time to put in a plea for an alternative scheme on which she had really set her heart.

"The Astons wrote this morning, and they want us to go down to Marden Court. Patricia and the children will be there too."

Bessington considered this awhile. He liked the Astons and the Masters, and Marden was an ideal place to visit, still it would be visiting and that meant comparatively trammelled liberty. There was the one advantage that he could run up to town when he liked and look after Madre without leaving Veronica alone.

"Mrs. Aston asked Madre to come too. That's why I went to her to-day, but she won't go, tiresome thing!"

"Did she write to Madre?"

"She enclosed a note, as she hadn't her address. Dominic, I do wish Madre would leave people her address."

"She'd have little peace if she did."

Veronica stood buttoning and unbuttoning his coat, with a grave face again.

"Well, when you have quite finished wearing out my buttonholes!"

"I am sure it sets people thinking—all kinds of things—I met Mr. Maughen to-day. He asked after Madre in such a curious way."

Dominic suddenly put his arms round her and held her to him.

"Veronica, my dear," he said, a little huskily, "it's one of the hardest things in the world to let other people do what they want and not interfere. I want you to trust Madre. I think she does know what she's doing, even if we don't. Don't let's make it harder for her."

"I think you do know, don't you?"

She spoke a little wistfully.

"Perhaps I am beginning to guess. We'll go to the Astons, if you like, my dear."

VI

Bessington used to go and see Felicity every other evening. This became an established thing unless they were dining out. He was late home in consequence, but Veronica did not complain. Neither did she ask questions. She was aware of some difficult and unhappy situation that was beyond her to deal with. It was best left in Dominic's hands. She visited her mother often and carried into the quiet little room the spice of gaiety and the small interests that had ever constituted her chief intercourse with her mother. Felicity loyally answered her. She laid not one item of her own troubles on her child's shoulders, and she undoubtedly found much relief and happiness in her visits. Very occasionally she would come up to Hampstead, but though she made no stipulations it was understood there should be no one else there when she came. Her refusal to meet her old friends worried Bessington more than all else, and a few evenings after his talk with Veronica, he telephoned to her that he should not be back to dinner, dined at his club and motored down to the deserted city afterwards.

The little square was getting accustomed to the sight of his motor waiting there. Even the shut-up offices seemed to blink at it through their closed windows in a friendly fashion. It was a hot July night. There were a few lamps lit in the square, but up in Felicity's rooms they cast no light. Bessington found her lying on a sofa by the open window, a lamp at her side shaded out of all use. He came in quietly, thinking he heard a response to his knock, but she had not heard it and started perceptibly.

"I was thinking of you," she said, holding out her hand and making no attempt to rise, or to apologise. She had given up pretending for Dominic!

After a few ordinary remarks he broached the subject he had come to speak about.

"Madre, why not go to Bath?"

She moved a little restlessly. If it had not been so dark he would have seen sharp trouble in her averted eyes.

"I am quite happy here, thank you."

"Yes, but for my own satisfaction, mayn't I know why not?"

"I don't think Alexander would care about it."

"Madre!"

"You see he—believes things!" she smiled faintly.

"I have heard from him. He is most horribly unhappy that he should have hurt you."

"I am so sorry. I ought to have written. I can't bear him to be unhappy when there's no need."

"He's unhappy because he allowed himself to be deceived by you."

He spoke in a low tone; and she did not seem to hear. She was gazing out of the window into the dark sky, darker here than westward, where the evening's work was barely begun. Here the city had already stretched herself to sleep.

"Fafner ought to read more novels, and go to more theatres," continued Bessington in the same slow voice.

"What ever for?"

"To sharpen his imagination. There's a play on now, for example——" He broke off to light a cigarette. He often told her of new plays and books; she said she preferred it to reading reviews.

"It's a play called, 'The Baby of the Family.' It's about a very spoilt young man adored by his family, the world and his own wife. The latter is ill, and he becomes bored and attempts to run away with the wife of a friend. One of his brothers, a Sir Galahad sort of man, called Leslie, finds him and the lady at

an inn, and sends him home to his wife and offers to take the lady back to her husband. She is in a bit of a rage with him, and on the way manages to damage his car, and they get hung up in a village late at night. The next morning the husband finds them there and puts the usual construction on the matter. To make it worse Sir Galahad is his own particular friend. Then his beautiful wife —of whom one might think he might be thankful to get rid—chips in and has her revenge by declaring that she and Leslie are devoted to each other, and that she doesn't in the least wish to return to her husband. What's the young man to do? He might give the lady the lie, but it wouldn't be a very nice position. He might give his young scoundrel of a brother away, but his wife is dangerously ill, and he —Leslie, isn't married. So he shrugs his shoulders and lets the lie be. The husband's all for divorcing his wife, and the family think it his plain duty to marry her, which he emphatically refuses to do. Of course this makes him look a double-dyed scoundrel, and every one straightway forgets his excellent reputation and dubs him villain, and he has to put up with that and a precious sight more. He just waits to see if his brother's wife is going to get better and if his brother will confess, but nothing happens. Which just shows"—he broke off meditatively—"how careful one should be about accepting evidence circumstantial that doesn't dovetail into character. I've no doubt that plenty of things do happen like that. Come and see it one evening, Madre."

She did not answer at once, but presently asked rather suddenly:

"What happens at the end?"

"Oh, the villain confesses, driven to it by the guileless face of his child. That's the weak part of the play. In real life he wouldn't have confessed."

"Oh, surely yes, when he had had time to consider!" When she—I mean when his wife was better."

"Not in real life, I fear," he repeated, looking hard at the floor; "that is unless some one got at—her."

He said the last word very softly, and barely moved, so intent was he not to startle her into caution just yet.

"But if he had promised his brother to say nothing he could do nothing but wait. Did he promise?"

"Yes. You think he was bound by that, even if he had not quite seen where it was leading him?"

"Of course if his brother was relying on it."

"Suppose his brother never had confessed?"

"He'd get used to it. Live it down. There would be sure to be some one who believed in him."

"There wasn't—in the play. And one person's believing wouldn't make much difference."

"It would—all the difference!" Her tone was heartfelt.

"What seemed to hurt most was the way every one was so ready to believe ill of him."

"Yes, it's strange, but a life's reputation will melt before rumour."

"It was at least circumstantial rumour. I shall take Fafner to see it."

"Why Fafner?"

"To quicken his imagination." Her eyes looked doubtful, puzzled. Bessington still looked hard at the floor.

"I don't understand."

"I do—at last—I think he might, too!"

"Understand what?" There was a note of anxiety in her voice.

"What you are waiting for?"

She sat upright, with a startled gasp.

"Dominic, turn up the light! I want to see you. What have I said!"

Her distress was poignant, and he obeyed instantly.

"Dominic, it isn't fair. You come when I am too tired to be on my guard. What are you thinking?"

"About you and—Stella. What fools we have been. Of course it's the only possible explanation. But you haven't betrayed any one. It's been only to me. That is the one way to reconcile facts."

But the pain and grief in her face were too much for him. He fell on his knees by her side, and caught her hands in his.

"Madre, dear, don't look so! It makes no difference! I am at your command. You don't think I'd give you away or take advantage. I can't see why you should do this, but you have every right if you wish!" He broke off. He wanted passionately to deny that right and to find some justification for action.

She turned her face against his sleeve and spoke in a low voice.

"She was terribly afraid of Adam. I promised her I wouldn't tell him till she was well and gave me leave. You are right there. That is what I have been waiting for. But if they are happy now, and she doesn't want to tell, it's much best to leave things as they are. I have been thinking this for some time."

"Best that she should be false to her promise and you true to yours?"

He could not keep the fierceness out of his voice.

"It's only Adam that matters, after all. I should have liked him to know; but it might make things all wrong again just when they are right. That would be such a pity. Don't you see, Dominic? But of course you will see that as they are both young and have everything before them, it's best left alone. I am sure Stella will be all right now, and I am getting over minding about Adam. And then you never believed it. That's what frightened me at first. It's not worth the trouble of explaining to any one else."

"I have no right to know," he groaned. "I learnt

it by trick almost. I came meaning to learn it. There is a play like that, Madre, but it was taking a beastly advantage of you so I can only do as you wish, though it's not what I wish at all."

"But you will when you have had time to think."

"No, I can't do that, but I can't all the same wish you to act one shade less splendidly than your beautiful self dictates."

"Now that's nonsense. Even in a play people do the same. I have no option."

"Make Stella come and see you."

"Adam wouldn't let her. Leave me a bit of pride, Dominic."

"What are you leaving yourself in life?"

"Lots of good things. Don't you see I can't go to Stella and say I find it's too much for me—Adam thinking badly of me—so she must own up and let him think badly of her for a change? It's out of the question."

"Yes—for you, but she should be reminded."

"And she would say I had broken my promise. Besides, Dominic, this is what you must consider: What's the use? It would undo everything and alter nothing. Even if Adam takes it well and isn't angry, still it would spoil his happiness. No, don't take your hand away, Dominic; think with me. It would be the worst thing in the world for any thing to come between them now. She would be unhappy again, and she has had such a bad time all the years she ought to have been most happy."

"Madre, I can't hold a brief for Stella Preston. It's not in human nature. I'd willingly sacrifice her whole happiness to give you a year of joy."

"But I could not have it like that."

"I know, that's the sole reason why I give in. You've got to be happy in your own way, even if it

means sacrificing yourself, and I've not the ghost of a right to prevent you."

She sighed with relief.

"You make things feel so secure again."

He had to be content with that, that she felt "secure"! But his heart ached not for her generous soul, but because he could not bring himself to believe her sacrifice was well expended.

He knew the original rumour was dying down, that what damage it could do was spent, but he also knew that Felicity's little world of trust and friendship was shattered, and above all, that she was robbed of the son of her adoption. All that could be saved for her, short of forcing her outside the strict limits of her code of honour, must be done.

He asked if he might not tell her brother.

"I do not think Alexander would see it as you do," she said slowly. "He would want to set things right in his own way. I mean he would not like promising——" she broke off. The issues seemed involved.

"I would not tell him just what had happened. Only that there was a misunderstanding."

She winced at that, remembering how intolerably that misunderstanding had hurt."

Still Bessington waited.

"Let things be as they are till the end of the summer," she pleaded. "It will make so little difference now."

That cut him to the heart again, so that his own faithfulness seemed but a small thing, since it had carried conviction to no one but Veronica. He kissed her hands again, and she lay back very white and tired, and then looked at him and smiled.

"I'm most ungrateful," she protested. "Really it might have been much worse, you know—and there was you all the time."

"Little enough I've done!" he groaned bitterly.

"More than enough. Oh, Dominic, you can't think what it means to have some one who believes in one!"

They sat silent awhile.

Presently she said: "I've been thinking" (but she had only thought it those few moments) "that when autumn comes I will go out to New Zealand for a trip."

"Why New Zealand?" with an access of thankfulness that she should again be making plans.

"There's a woman here, a Mrs. Purley, one of Mr. Seeler's flock, who has a son out there and simply longs to go out to him every minute of the day. But she hasn't the money, and she can't face the journey alone. Now if I were going, I could look after her, or rather, she could look after me, and feel she was some good; and New Zealand must be interesting."

He encouraged the idea merely for the sake of getting her interested in the future. The old instinct of service was irreducible in her. If it could not be given to the young it must be given to the old.

All the way back to Hampstead his mind demanded why they had not all guessed instantly what was the real state of the case. It was so obvious once one had the clue.

In thinking of Stella he nearly collided with another car, saved himself indeed by a hair's breadth, and thought no more kindly of Stella Preston for that. Yet curiosity, rather than wrath, dominated his mind with regard to her. He found strangeness in the fact that while his anger with Adam was still red hot, for Stella he felt a cold critical interest. He wanted to pin her out and examine her mind as if she were some new sort of insect he had not classified.

But Adam he had, and could classify, and because his motives and acts were clear, and in some way understandable, Bessington felt a right to anger. He would almost have liked the task of interviewing Stella,

but he could not have brought himself to meeting Adam with any certainty of keeping the peace.

VII

When Bessington had gone, Felicity let her thoughts roam where they would in the now unusual luxury of freedom. A great peace and happiness wrapt her round, so that for the moment it was to her not night she looked at but a transcendent shimmering darkness more beautiful than day. Dominic knew. He would wonder no more, make no more surmises. The weakening dread that hung over her was gone. The crowning happiness was, that he accepted her ruling, and her right to act in her own way. She had braced herself for a struggle, and there had been practically none. In her heart she had known that had he insisted otherwise, had there been a struggle, he would have won. She could not have stood out against his expressed will.

Now because he not only knew, but understood, the burden was halved. She did not mind in the least what others thought or had thought. She could afford to admit there was nothing else they could think, since they were not Dominic!

It did not occur to her to come out of her retreat, however, or take up her old life again. Apart from this heart trouble, which she still refused to consider as permanent, there would be the necessity, if she returned to her own world, of some day or other meeting Adam, and she still could not face that calmly. She dreaded reading again in his eyes the contempt and disillusionment she had read there once. It was not that she felt his judgment was biased, intolerant and unsound, but that he was Adam, the boy to whom she had given her mother's heart; and he had ceased to believe in her.

To restore that belief would be to shatter his present and future happiness. A thing unthinkable! Dominic must see that in time. She wondered she had not seen it more clearly herself before this. If, as she believed, maturity gave Stella the balance she had wanted, there was really no fear of a relapse, of that Felicity was sure, and on that she based all her judgments.

Dominic was right in one thing, she admitted: Stella would not confess. "She wasn't made that way," was the excuse she made for her. She was not sure it was not a fortunate thing—for Adam. Then again consideration even of Adam faded from her. All she felt most keenly was centred in Dominic, and this wonderful halving of trouble. She was glad—glad beyond measure that he knew! She remembered there was a time when she had hoped that Adam would marry Veronica! So dim sighted are we even for those we love!

Her brave soul voyaged to the stars, now shining faintly in the summer sky, and there in those high realms it faced possibilities, smiled bravely in their faces, defied their power, and so returned to earth the stronger and steadier for the flight.

"All the same I think I shall go to New Zealand," said Felicity to herself.

CHAPTER XII

"The Feet of a True Friend are Swifter Than Rumour."

I

STELLA sat in the garden under a clump of bamboos, with her baby on her knees. The baby should have been in the cot by her side. Nurse strongly disapproved of too much nursing; but Stella liked nursing her son, and she had an instinctive feeling that Adam liked seeing her hold him; and Adam would be back in a few minutes. A new perambulator stood near, and Stella was occupied with considerations of its colour. Had she done well to choose grey? Would not a dark colour have been more distinguished? Adam was going to take her to some College Sports that afternoon, and she had an exceedingly becoming dress to wear. Also he had at last consented to her attending the Staff College Ball at the end of the month. All these were matters productive of content, adding to the general pleasures of life. Then the gate swung open and Adam came into the garden, and that also added to life—very considerably.

How nice he looked coming up the path, straight, and well built and beautiful; tanned, though the tan never spoilt the clearness of his complexion. There were still old friends who called him Eve. Stella was not sure that she approved, but she saw a point in it.

He came to her, kissed her, stroked his little son's soft face, and sat down on the grass at her feet.

She wanted very badly to stroke his hair, but experience had taught her wisdom and she refrained.

"I met poor old Felton this morning," he said presently. "His wife is dead, you know."

A faint shadow dimmed Stella's bright vista. Why had he mentioned Mrs. Felton?

"It's a good thing for him, one would think, but really he's awfully cut up."

"Well, I suppose he was fond of her." Stella's voice was low and a little impatient.

"One would think she had killed all that long ago."

"Wouldn't you care for me any more if I——"

He gave a quick angry gesture.

"Don't talk rot, Stella, or imagine disgusting things."

His face clouded. The perfect sunshine of their day was undoubtedly crossed with shadow now.

Somewhere in the depths of her memory, a promise, an obligation, stirred uneasily. There was no occasion to do anything, of course, but the pressure of the memory and the slight harass pushed her on.

"But I should care for you, whatever happened," she said, "and I want to feel you'd care for me too."

He moved uneasily, not caring for these discussions.

"If you were like Mrs. Felton, you wouldn't be you, so what's the use of talking like that?"

"I shouldn't be the same to you?"

"Well, should I be the same to you if I took to house-breaking or wife-beating?"

"Yes."

"Rot, Stella! Stop it. I don't like it, old girl."

She stopped, but at the back of her mind there rested a new conviction that her present happiness was less secure than she had fancied. She would think of these uncomfortable things no more.

But she was not allowed to put them aside so com-

pletely, nor to evade her obligations, without a better understanding of what she was doing. In other words, she was to be given her chance.

Almost the first person she and Adam encountered as they entered the college grounds was Jim Streeter, just home from the West Indies, brown, cheery, and in splendid spirits. He had come up to see a brother who bade fair to carry off honours at high jump.

Adam was delighted, and Stella at first was pleased enough, though she rather resented his warm enquiries for Mark. It was not until they were at tea, that Streeter really disturbed her. Then he turned rather abruptly to Adam and said:

"Where's Madre? We were staying with the Merediths last week—went there feeling sure she would be there, but she wasn't. Beastly disappointment, and what's more, none of them could give us her address. I know she isn't travelling, because I met some one who had seen her lately."

"The Bessingtons would give it to you."

Adam spoke in a quiet, level voice.

"How do they get on? Why on earth didn't Bessington marry Madre?"

"She is years older than he is," put in Stella sharply.

"No older than he is older than Veronica! Besides, Madre will never be old. However, it's their affair."

He considered his tea cup gravely. Obviously, he had something else on his mind, but whatever it was, he desisted from saying it then, and allowed the subject to be changed. When the sports were over, they walked back together, Adam having persuaded him to come back to dinner with them. It was on the way home that he again broached the subject of Madre.

"About Madre," he began.

Stella stopped a little angry protest with difficulty.

"What's that, a caterpillar, Mrs. Preston? Never

mind, it's only taken refuge down your collar; you wouldn't turn a harmless caterpillar out at this hour! About Madre, Adam. What's wrong? Wilson says he met her at a picture gallery, and she was awfully depressed and would hardly talk to him or his sister, and yesterday I ran down to see old Fafner and he said he hadn't even got her address. Did you ever hear such nonsense?"

"I haven't got it either," returned Adam stolidly.

Streeter stared at him blankly.

"Have you all quarrelled with Madre? Because if you have, and are spoiling for a fight, I'm your man!" He laughed in his whole-hearted way, and then because there was no response, it dawned on his thick head, that the subject was distasteful. He was both puzzled and angry, and decided he'd go and see the Bessingtons to-morrow and have it out with some one.

Stella left the men soon after dinner, saying she was tired. She could not, in point of fact, endure sitting there waiting for Streeter to open the obnoxious subject again.

She went upstairs to her room but did not rest. Her mind was busy thrusting back into its cage a memory that she had kept severely prisoner all these days, but it was a little difficult to set up the bars again. Of course, if Madre—no, she would not call her that silly name—if Mrs. Crofton wasn't well and didn't want to go about, it really did not matter much what people were foolish enough to think. She didn't believe that Adam cared so very much after all. He hadn't answered Streeter as if he did; and, in any case, Adam was happy as things were, and if she did anything he wouldn't be happy. It was really a question of having her, or Madre, and of course he would rather have his wife. Do anything? What did it mean exactly? What would she do?— But of course

she wasn't going to do anything. She saw at once, when she thought quietly, that it was not only impossible, but unwise. It was quite an impossible suggestion that she should jeopardise their present happiness by racking up old stories that would at least cause unpleasantness. It might have been another matter if Mrs. Crofton had been related to Adam but she was merely a friend, or had been, and Adam got on quite well without her. If he had to choose between them, he would naturally choose to keep his wife! That was the end of the matter.

Adam came out of the door below and walked to the garden gate with Streeter. She could see him in the moonlight. How nice he looked—but he had to be kept nice. Stella made up her mind it was her chief business to keep him so.

II

"I never feel it is quite nice of you all to go on as usual when we are all exiles," remarked Mrs. Saunders, half laughing, half wistfully.

"It looks a bearable exile," returned her friend, just out from England on a visit.

Looking round the long low room with its essentially English furniture, its ribbon bedecked cushions, its photographs, its chintz-covered chairs, its many indifferent little water colours and collections of all sorts, it was difficult to imagine oneself more than fifty miles from London at the most. Only up in the ceiling the punka fans waved automatically, and the windows were shaded and darkened in an un-English way.

Afternoon tea was going on, though it was supplemented by iced drinks, and whiskies and sodas. Of the two women and three women who occupied the

room, three belonged to the house, and two, both men, were visitors. One was Mark Forrester, and he sat near his hostess, saying little, but listening with interest to the news of "home" which a fresh arrival, a Miss Chancely, was dealing out in a wholesale manner.

"It's bearable, but it's not 'home.'" Mrs. Saunders insisted. "Go on, Mabel, what did you do in the spring? Did the Maughens have their usual 'spring gathering'?"

"Yes, more than ever, but it wasn't quite such fun as usual; I don't know why."

"Who was there?"

Miss Chancely ran off a long list of names, and her friends ticked them off with a little nod of recognition. "All the old set! Lucky creatures; but you've forgotten Mrs. Crofton."

"She wasn't there."

"Not there?" Her voice was incredulous. "But a party without her is unheard of."

Miss Chancely took some more bread and butter and maintained a silence that, whatever it was intended to convey, was not noncommittal.

"She isn't ill, is she?" demanded Mrs. Saunders quickly, but she turned to Mark Forrester as she spoke for an answer.

"I was just going to ask Miss Chancely that. I have not heard from her for over three months."

Miss Chancely still devoted herself to her tea. "I don't think she is ill exactly, she just wasn't there."

Neither of her listeners was to be diverted. Saunders himself, the thin long-legged man who had been talking to the doctor, was an old pupil of Mr. Fraser's, and on hearing Mrs. Crofton's name, had come over to the little group near the tea table.

"What's that you were saying? Anything wrong *with* Mrs. Crofton?"

Miss Chancely began to wish she had concealed her knowledge of Mrs. Crofton's movements. She was not an especial friend of hers, like these others, but she liked her, and they all did more than like her. It was an awkward situation; still she had created it herself, and must face it.

"I don't really think there is anything the matter, you know. Only, Mrs. Crofton hasn't been well, they say, and isn't going about."

"The last time I heard of her she was going to Italy, taking a villa, and proposed taking a party of girls with her." This was from Mark Forrester.

"Yes—well, she didn't go. They couldn't, or something."

Miss Chancely was obviously frightened. She had sudden recollections that the Prestons were somehow related to Mr. Forrester, of whom she felt rather in awe, and it complicated matters. It was Mrs. Saunders who saw as much and rather cleverly turned back the talk to other subjects. Mark Forrester stayed rather later than usual, and before he went, he managed to find time for a private word with Mrs. Saunders.

"You are a good sort, and you've done many kind things for me. Do another," he said urgently.

"Well?"

"Find out for me what's amiss with Madre."

"Mrs. Crofton?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Saunders considered a moment and then gave the promise.

Three days later she wrote and asked him to come to tea again. This time he found her alone. Saunders and Miss Chancely had gone out.

"I sent them out," she admitted frankly. "I found out what you wanted to know, and you won't like it, and I thought if you were going to get in a temper

over it, you'd better do it alone. George has got over his."

"You told him?"

"Of course. You are not the only person in the world interested in Mrs. Crofton, my dear man! Now sit quiet, and don't swear more than you can help. George did.

"Miss Chancely says there is a story going round, that while Mrs. Crofton was staying with Mrs. Preston, her husband, Adam Preston, found out that she was taking drugs, and wouldn't let her stay there even, and somehow the story got about. I believe he denies mentioning it, but the Maughens and others heard of it somehow, and wouldn't let their girls go out to Italy with Mrs. Crofton, and she took it hardly, and went away into the country, and though the Bessingtons have done all they can to deny it, still, there it is. There are odd circumstances, and Mrs. Crofton can't or won't, even write to her friends! You have not heard from her yourself, you said!"

She tried to end in a light vein, and looked at him with a rather pleading attempt to get him to see the smallness of the affair, but her heart jumped at the sight of his suddenly hardened face.

He got up and put down the cup he held, and looked at his watch mechanically.

"You are not going yet?" she managed to say with an admirable pretence that she had noticed nothing.

"I must catch my chief—when can I see Miss Chancely?"

"She won't want to talk about it. She wishes already she had never mentioned it."

"She must talk. I must have it as much first hand as possible."

"You take it so seriously. After all, heaps of *women* take drugs. It's not so awful."

"Isn't it? Have you ever met any one who did? Any one you cared for?"

His voice was stern and bitter. She would much rather he had sworn—like George.

"No one I knew intimately, but still——"

"Mrs. Crofton doesn't take drugs, anyhow," he went on quietly, "and that's not the sort of thing to be said about any woman when it's not true."

"My dear Mark, how can you know? You haven't seen her for three years."

"Twenty years wouldn't have made any difference. Please ask Miss Chancely to see me this evening, if you can."

She was really rather alarmed at him, and wanted him gone, so she promised.

She discussed the matter with her husband while they dressed for dinner.

"Forrester's an odd chap," he remarked; "he wouldn't take things like that without reason. Of course it's all damn rot, as I said this morning."

"You said more than that," remarked his wife softly.

"Well, perhaps I did."

"Forrester was a special protégé of hers, I've heard, and so was Preston. They were both after my time, but I met them at old boys' matches, and her too. She's a good sort. I believe she nearly adopted Preston."

"Well, then, he wouldn't let this story get about if it wasn't true."

"Oh, I don't know. Anyhow, if Forrester wants to do something, you'd better back him up."

Mark had his interview with Miss Chancely, who took great pains to impress on him that she was only relating hearsay at his special request.

"I quite understand that," he told her somewhat grimly; "it's only hearsay, but it's got to be heard to be stopped."

He gathered a little more from this interview, learnt that Madre had been supposed to be seedy for some time, and that this rumour had come on the top of a vague wonder amongst her friends; heard that many of those friends later on had steadily put their faces against the rumour, but too late to do any real good, and that Mrs. Crofton's own action in refusing to go about or meet people, had made refutation even more difficult; that the Bessingtons would not mention the subject, and appeared to be satisfied that Mrs. Crofton should retire from her usual social life if she wished to; that they and the Prestons were not on speaking terms. Here Mark rather took her aback by asking: "Where are the Prestons?"

"They are at Camberley; he's in the staff college, and Mrs. Preston and the baby flourish exceedingly. Their cousin, Miss Mitchen, is a great friend of mother's," Miss Chancely explained; "that's how it is I know so much of them."

She was still puzzling in her mind what was the precise connection of Mr. Forrester to the Prestons. It must be slight, or he would have known their address.

Mark made a note of the address.

"Your mother knows Mrs. Crofton, too, I think?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, but not intimately. She met her at the Massinghams'."

Mark got up and shook himself, and looked down at Miss Chancely speculatively.

"When you write to your mother, Miss Chancely, will you tell her that the rumour about Mrs. Crofton is quite unfounded, and will she contradict it flatly?"

"On your authority?"

"Yes. I know how it got about, you see, and it's got to be set right. It's quite untrue."

"You will have to make Adam Preston believe that to do any good."

"He's going to believe it," returned Mark, so grimly, that Miss Chancely was startled into uneasy conviction not only of his sincerity, but of something behind it she could not name.

"Thank you," he said, holding out his hand. "Don't forget to tell your mother that—and I hope you'll have a good time out here."

She really found nothing to say to him, though she found plenty to think about. Mrs. Saunders was very annoyed to come in ten minutes later and find her alone and Mark gone.

"I wanted him particularly to settle up about the picnic," she complained, but her friend could only say he had gone before she could think of any other subject for conversation.

Mrs. Saunders was still more annoyed and amazed when her husband came in that evening, and told her that mad fellow Forrester had been to his chief and commandeered three months leave on important business.

"The cheek of it!" growled Saunders, struggling with a refractory collar.

"Whatever did Lord Luden say?" she asked.

"That's the most maddening part of it. He said yes!"

"He's let him go?" echoed Mrs. Saunders, staring open mouthed and open eyed at her husband.

"Let him go! He wired within half an hour to Bombay for a berth in the first boat, and he's starting to-night! That young man will go far, Winifred."

"As far as England, it seems," she retorted drily.

"Further than that," chuckled Saunders. "I ask you, is Luden the sort of man who gives his secretaries leave off on demand?"

"It's incredible!"

"It's blackmail, nothing short," laughed Saunders. "That's why I said he'd go far."

"George, you are most indiscreet."

"Winifred, you have lost your sense of humour."

"I have. If Mark's gone, I shall give up my picnic. He might have come to say good-bye. What has he gone for?"

"How should I know."

"It's Mrs. Crofton," pronounced his wife with decision. "I am sure of it."

"Rot! A man doesn't tear off to England because some one spreads tales he doesn't like about a woman nearly old enough to be his mother."

"Mark would."

She could not convince him.

Yet the truth was Mark got his leave because he told Lord Luden exactly why he wanted it, and Luden had known Mrs. Crofton in past days.

III

Felicity languidly turned over a guide to New Zealand. On a paper besides her there were some rough calculations set down, but she was not greatly interested in either the one or the other. She had just returned from a call on Mrs. Seeler. There had been several other callers, mostly old or at least elderly. They had talked a great deal about the foolishness of the young, and Felicity, looking at them, had wondered what they found to compensate for the irreparable loss of what they condemned. But she said nothing, for what was the use, if in their hearts they had not realised their passing touch with splendour, and the possibilities the years had stifled in them? Mrs. Purley, who wanted (but in rather a half-hearted manner when it came to the point) to go to New Zealand, was amongst them. She also accepted her age, as bestowing honour on her rather than robbing her of rights.

She accepted it as she accepted her indifferent health, as something expected and appropriate.

When she left Felicity had made a slight protest against this attitude to Mr. Seeler, who accompanied her to the door.

"Age might be so beautiful if coupled to the right things," she said wistfully.

"What are the right things?" he asked gravely.

"Joy and appreciation, and understanding of youth!" she answered promptly.

Her eyes pleaded for agreement, but he shook his head.

"Age means more than that, Mrs. Crofton."

"Yes, it means accepting the fact that one has lost the game with a good heart and never discouraging others!"

"Life isn't a game."

"It's a puzzle. Age, like death, is a mistake that we have never yet found the way to avoid; but some day, some young thing will find it out."

He looked and was shocked.

"Death and age are part of life and inevitable."

"Christ did not think so; did not think them inevitable or eternal truths," she replied, with that swiftness that he had learned to dread; "and if age were the desideratum of the earth, it would hold most joy and most knowledge, and in that case Christ would have waited another twenty years before teaching."

He looked more shocked than ever.

"Those are not very safe ideas, Mrs. Crofton."

He was profoundly sorry for her, and anxious to help her into safe or orthodox paths, but so far he had failed, and he knew it, and it humiliated him.

"If I really left off wanting things, or caring about seeing things, or seeing others do them, which is the next best thing, I would much rather die."

"That is not in our hands."

She still had one more bolt for him, and she shot it.

"I wonder! Sometimes I think we have more to say in the matter than we think!"

It left him speechless, only relieved that she should go. Instinctively she knew she had more than shocked him, and she turned penitently on the step.

"You mustn't mind my saying things I think, even if you don't agree. There are some things which are much more alive when they are spoken than when they are thought, and they want to be alive."

That was why she got out the guide books when she got back. She wanted to make quite sure she was interested in things.

But she pushed them away.

After all, it was not the journey against which her mind rebelled, but the companion with whom it would be undertaken.

"She will always be looking at things, not taking part in them," she murmured with a sort of despair. "And even then she will be thinking how much wiser she is than those foolish young things! Now I don't mind, or don't much mind, looking on, but I shall understand how lovely it is, and I want my companion to be taking part in it. Yet the voyage would be so good for her if she would take it!"

But she herself to-day could not face the prospect of life tied to unappreciative age. It was not age itself against which she fought, but that self-appreciation that had let go its vision and remembered nothing of the glory of it.

"I will not get like that! I *will* not!" she repeated again and again. "I will let myself die first!"

She turned to the papers and found herself languidly interested, indifferent to news that would once have interested her, until she came to a paragraph announcing the marriage of Rosalind Meredith to

young Harmore. Rosalind had never written to tell her she was even engaged! She had loved her best of all the girls, and she did not like this marriage for she knew Rosalind's heart was set elsewhere. If only she had known in time! It wouldn't bear thinking about! . . . .

She tried instead to think of the sea, of yellow sands and dancing water, of racing wind and cool woods; but none of these things moved her to-day to an answering throb of desire.

She was conscious of weariness and oppression. When she came to think of it, there was nothing young in all the house! Nothing in all the Square—unless it were the sparrows! There was Mr. Carey downstairs. Old, quite old. There was Mr. Mears. Only thirty-seven, according to his wife! According to Felicity, he must be one hundred and thirty-seven! There was Mrs. Mears herself, with her inward fund of cheerful optimism, but with her hair growing grey in spite of it, and lines pencilling the corners of her eyes, far older than her years warranted. There were clerks—young men, some young, some old, in the big office across the way, but if they were young, they lacked the grace of youth. She never saw their rounded figures and dull faces, without an heart ache for a sight of Adam's fresh, clear, satisfying beauty and easy energy. The Seelers had children, but they were already teaching in Sunday schools and collecting for open air funds, fed already with the responsibilities of life.

No! The Square held nothing young! That was what was the matter with her!

She would go and see Veronica. It was the only satisfactory thing left, that there was always Veronica, young, and not entangled in responsibilities. There was no one else left to see. They wouldn't trust her with youth now. Not even with Rosalind! She

stretched out her hands, looking at them piteously. They seemed to her suddenly grown empty!

Felicity dropped her hands on her lap. No, she would not go to Hampstead. She was too tired, and what did it matter! It was no use. She was getting old like the rest of the world. She was tired, tired, tired!

IV

Mark deserted the boat at Brindisi, and travelling overland arrived in London two days later at the untoward hour of seven-thirty.

He found an hotel, breakfasted, and as early as was permissible he went to The Temple.

When Bessington arrived he was told a gentleman was already waiting to see him.

"A Mr. Forrester," explained the clerk rather nervously, lest he should have done wrong to admit so early a visitor. He said he was a friend of yours."

"Quite so," said Bessington absently.

He stopped for a minute outside the door to weigh the possibilities of this visit. There might be a hundred reasons for Mark's return, but he could think of only one for his early appearance at his door. His mind at least jumped to this one conclusion, and there was a deep ring of truth in his first greeting to Mark:

"No man in the world more welcome."

Mark looked him steadily in the face.

"Can you guess what I have come for?"

"An address, isn't it? How do you happen to be in England?"

"I heard something I didn't like in India, and I've come to set it right." Mark spoke shortly. "I want Madre's address."

"You came all the way for that?"

"It's a mistake. It's got to be put right."

Bessington took up his pen and began to draw odd

shapes on a blotter. After a moment's silence he said:

"I am glad you can put it right. I never believed it for a minute, of course."

"Other people have, apparently. I want you to tell me just how much damage has been done."

Bessington looked at the thin, bronzed face before him. Why on earth, if Madre must needs play at having a son, couldn't she have set her affection on Mark instead of Adam?

"I came overland from Brindisi," said Mark, as one disposing of a secondary subject to clear the ground. "I have to save days, as I've got not quite two months' leave. That's why I came to you first for the address."

Bessington nodded, but still he did not give it.

He appreciated to the full the other's singleness of purpose, but what would Madre say?

"How did you hear about it?" he asked.

Mark told him, still without waste of a single word, in no haste, and in a perfectly even voice.

"I might have written," he concluded, "but Stella has been too much for me before, and it was quicker and safer to come. It was Stella, of course, and not Madre who took the stuff. Morphine, I suppose. She took it years ago, though I thought she was cured. I don't know in the least why Madre took it on herself, unless to save Stella a row with Preston. She must have found Stella out, and tried to shield her. Probably Stella got some promise out of her. That is all I can make of it. It's preposterous that Madre should suffer in the least for Stella, and of course, it can't be allowed to go on. That's my story. What's yours?"

There was no bitterness in his tone, only a drear acceptance of facts, that told Bessington bitterness had worn itself out with the years. He was profoundly sorry for Mark, and touched to the quick by his act of direct chivalry, as something which concerned not only

Madre but himself. All the same he answered him guardedly.

"Madre herself told me nothing. But there is no doubt you are right. She must have made a promise to your sister. How it came out no one knows. Adam swears he told no one. I fear I did not believe him. It's easy for us to say it's preposterous, but the wickedness of it lies in the fact that the surface story *is* true, you see. Adam *did* find the morphine and the rest of it, and Madre *did* claim them, and Adam *did* turn her out—intolerant young brute! With that start it was not possible to do much when one had so little to go on but personal conviction."

He felt as if he were on his defence before this plain dealing man who had travelled six thousand miles to kill a rumour concerning a woman he loved and respected. He moved his chair a little, so that he was not bound to look directly at Mark, for after all it was not pleasant to have tacitly to admit one's sister had neither conscience nor morals. But Mark was unmoved: he merely shifted one leg over the other.

"Madre took it to heart rather badly, I fear. First Adam's believing her what she told him,—which was like a woman! And more because he behaved badly to her. (Not that you will ever get her to admit that—I am telling you what I think her feelings were.) Then came the Merediths and the rest of them with their letters and excuses, and she could do nothing. He went to see Fafner, and Fafner—I suppose he was caught by the way she put it—was angry, and said things he repented afterwards.—You can guess all that!"

Mark nodded.

"Anyhow, after that she wouldn't see any one for ages. Then I found her, and she became more sensible, and people began to be a bit ashamed of themselves, but she still wouldn't go about. Couldn't, really,

and didn't want to own it. Her chief trouble now is that, though most people would be the same to her if they met her, they still wouldn't let their children come to her as they used to do, while she has no explanation to give. That's what hurts her. It cuts her off from young things!"

Mark moved restlessly.

"Well, it's going to be explained."

"If she will let you!"

"What do you mean?"

"She doesn't want any explanation now, because she says it would be much harder for Adam not to be angry with your sister after all this time, and that as they are very happy together she won't risk breaking that happiness."

"Happiness that isn't deserved!" returned Mark, with a short laugh.

"Madre isn't well, Mark. I am not sure that you can argue it out with her. That was another nail for the rumour to hammer on. She hasn't been herself for some time, and though we all noticed it, she wouldn't own up. She has some heart trouble, and it's taking the energy out of her. That, and the position of things together. I am not at all sure she will let you do anything."

"Then I'll convince Stella first."

His lips shut like a trap.

"All you can do there without upsetting Madre, is to make her release Madre from her promise."

"Yes. I'll do that." He got up and stared out of the window.

"There's one thing I might tell you, Bessington. When Stella married I stipulated with her that she should tell Adam about this old—failing, of hers. And because I guessed that Stella funked it, I wrote to Madre and asked her to back Stella up. I honestly thought there was no chance of the trouble cropping

up again, but Preston was my best friend, and he had the right to know. Stella, I suppose, told Madre just as much of her story as she wanted to, and Madre, without entering into particulars, just wrote to me and said it was all told and settled. Stella never wrote at all. Stella never could run straight. I meant to see Madre first, to find out just what Stella did tell her, so as to know where I was with Stella, because if Adam really did know this, and swallowed Madre's tale he's more crassly stupid than I thought. He never could see more than two issues to anything," he went on, in a ruminating way, "a right and a wrong. Life's simple enough when one only sees that!"

"It's apt to make it very uncomfortable for other people," began Bessington hotly.

Mark looked at him with lifted brows.

"Preston would never be concerned with other people!"

"I thought he was your friend?"

"Friends aren't necessarily saints. Besides, one must be fair. The blame does not rest with him."

"That's where we differ, Mark. My quarrel with Preston is that he believed this of Madre. It was that which hurt her most. Also I had believed it was he who gave the story away, but I suppose," he admitted it grudgingly, "there are other possibilities."

"I am afraid so. There shouldn't have been anything to give away. The fault is mine for not having written to Preston myself when they were married. I didn't because I thought it would come better from her—but it leaves me responsible. Now please what's Madre's address?'

"She has been living in the city with one of her protégés, a Mrs. Mears. Yesterday I was telephoned for her by Mrs. Mears. Madre had had an extra bad fainting attack. I insisted on taking her up to Hampstead *in the* evening, and she's there now."

Mark tried to hide his anxiety, but failed.

"How bad is she?"

"She is well over it now, but no one knows how long she will keep well, you see. She has had this trouble for three or four years, and has been fighting it off. Her doctor says it must have started by some unusual physical strain, but she won't tell what it was, even if she knows. You know how she hates being thought ill."

"Is it—dangerous?"

"Not immediately. He says if she leads a perfectly quiet life, and doesn't wear herself out doing the things she likes doing, travelling and looking after people, for example, she may live as long as any of us. If she does do what she likes doing, he will answer for nothing."

There was excessive bitterness in his voice, and Mark looked at him curiously.

"You will not find it easy to make her do nothing."

"No." The answer was brief, almost curt.

"How's Veronica?" asked Mark.

Bessington replied absently.

Both men were silent for a space, both thinking of the same woman, both wondering a little at the other's devotion to her, and both glad of it.

"Which are you going to see first?" asked Bessington at last.

"Stella. I shall go down by the two o'clock train."

"I am not sure Madre will be pleased."

"I'm sorry, but I'll run no risks. At present I, at least, am bound by no promise."

"No, but when you see her you will find yourself bound by her wishes, like the rest of us."

"That's why I go to Camberley first. All being well, may I come up to you to-morrow?"

"Will you have attacked matters so quickly?"

Mark's lips straightened.

"Would you put up with a day's delay in my place?"

"I suppose not. But I must warn her you are coming, Mark."

"As you like."

He took his hat to go, hesitated a minute, as if he had still something to say, but went without saying it. It would after all be slightly invidious to thank Madre's own son-in-law for believing in her!

V

Bessington went back to Hampstead directly after lunch. He had an uncomfortable conviction that loyalty to Madre demanded his instant avowal of Mark's return and his purpose. He had not seen her that morning. Although she declared she had quite recovered from yesterday's really alarming attack, she had yielded to Veronica's entreaty that she should at least remain in bed to breakfast. In her heart of hearts she was glad and thankful to be here with her loved ones, glad that the decision had been taken so authoritatively out of her hands; glad to feel how utterly she was in Dominic's power when it was his will to exert it. It was so long since any one had had either the right or the assurance to dictate to her. It would have fretted her terribly from any one else, but from Dominic it was something of a joy. Life did not seem so difficult.

The depression of the past week lifted a little, and when Dominic saw her she was her usual cheerful self, but very apologetic over her collapse of yesterday.

"It was such a stupid thing to do—and I must have interfered shamefully with your work."

Dominic agreed gravely that it was very stupid, but added that his work had survived.

"It is really all the fault of Sir Christopher Wren.

He shouldn't have put so many steps to his cathedral."

"I don't regret my time in Lutton Square at all," she said presently; "it was peaceful, and Janet Mears is worth knowing. However, I don't think I ever felt a 'real fit' or part of it all. It was very unreal, like being half awake. I'm afraid the Seelers were very disappointed with me. I have never come in close contact with that sort of good orthodox people before, and I've learnt a lot, but not quite what they wanted me to learn. I really wanted to find out if that sort of thing meant anything to me. But it doesn't! It was all just an interlude."

"Life's made up of interludes," he told her cheerfully, "and it's only dull when they are too prolonged."

"Yes, that's just my idea, and then people call one restless."

She looked anything but restless just then, but Dominic's conscience was, and it pressed him to confession.

"Guess whom I've seen to-day?"

"I don't like guessing. Tell me."

"Well, then—Mark."

She sat bolt upright.

"Mark! Is he never going to give us warning of his leave, like a rational being? What is he home for?"

"Pleasure, I suppose. You are not to get excited, Madre, or I won't go on."

"I am not excited; I am interested. When is he coming to see me?"

"To-morrow if you are well enough."

"I'm not ill, Dominic. It was only the steps and the heat."

"Yes, of course; we know that."

"Where's Mark to-day?"

"Gone down to the Prestons'."

She caught a curious note in his voice, and her mind sprang to wakeful alertness.

"Dominic, what is it? You are keeping something from me. Why is he gone to them?"

"Where should he go, if not to his own sister and friend?"

"I wish he had come to me first. I ought to see him before—before——" Her voice faltered slightly—"before he hears—anything."

Her eyes questioned him sharply, but he kept his on the floor.

"He hasn't heard things already, Dominic?"

"Yes, he heard something in India."

She leant back with a look of pain in her eyes.

"So far away as that?"

"From Miss Chancely, just out. He didn't like what he heard, so he came over to set it right—that's all!"

He smiled at her reassuringly. After all she had better know. It was too late now to do anything.

"All! You talk as if India were next door."

"I told him you might like to see him to-morrow."

She did not speak for a while. She lay still, with shining eyes, then suddenly her face changed.

"He has gone to them at Camberley, you say?"

"Yes."

She put her hand on his arm, and he saw that it was shaking.

"Dominic, he must be stopped. I won't have trouble made between Adam and Stella now. I couldn't bear it. You must stop it!"

Her face was strained and anxious. He saw it was no passing fancy with her, and also that she must be kept quiet; but it went sorely against the grain.

"We've been through it, Dominic, before. You *said* you understood. Don't fail me after all!"

"What do you want me to do?" he sighed.

"Wire to him. Tell him I insist on his waiting to see me. Oh, suppose it is too late!"

He had to reassure her, her agitation was so great.

"He did not go down till the two o'clock train. Most likely a wire would be in time."

"Send it quickly, Dominic. It's why you told me, isn't it?"

"I don't know why I was fool enough to tell you!" he grumbled.

"Because you understand—and I trust you. Be quick."

He had to write a wire then and there, and despatch it. After that was done, she was content to lie quiet. It was obvious to him that she could at present stand no extra strain of any kind. He was glad when the doctor paid her an afternoon visit. He only repeated what Bessington had heard before. "She mustn't be allowed to exert herself in any way. Get her into a quiet country place as soon as you can, so she can lie out in a garden and do nothing but vegetate."

"For how long?" he questioned.

The doctor looked at him quizzically.

"How can I tell?"

"Will she get really well like that?"

"There is such a thing as compensation. But when an engine has got a flaw in it, no amount of compensation will make it safe to work it at full pressure."

"It's stagnation for her."

"So you said before."

Having seen the doctor off, he went back slowly to the hall, and there he found little Mrs. Mears, who had brought up some of Madre's "things" as an excuse for coming to see how she had stood the journey.

She begged for a word with him, and he took her into his own room.

"Mr. Bessington, sir—there's something I want to say to you; I came up hoping I should see you. If I

did, I knew I *had* to say it, and here you are. It's just this. Don't let the doctors stop Mrs. Crofton going about and living naturally. The worst thing that could happen to her would be being made to give up and let other folks think she is a permanent invalid. No one is, really, of course. They only think it," she added hurriedly.

He looked down at her rather white, anxious little face; anxious despite her faith, and he said rather grimly:

"I have just been told to do precisely what you say I am not to do, Mrs. Mears. What am I to believe?"

"I feel it here," she thumped her breast, "that she will get well if she's only 'let.' If some one that understands will stand by her. If she is tired let her rest. The right sort of rest means healing. But I know what I am saying if only I could convince you, sir." Her appealing eyes were fixed on him.

"Why me?" he said, half to himself.

"That I can't tell you, but somehow I know it will rest with you."

He interposed.

"You would say let her travel, or do what ever she wishes?"

He was not scoffing at her, nor was he taking grip of her faith, though her idea was nearer his mind than the doctor's.

"Let her follow the wish that is in her most deeply. It's not there for nothing."

"I can only say that if it rested with me I would rather have her her old self for a few years than an invalid for a long life."

"It *does* rest with you. I saw that yesterday. But you mustn't limit the time like that, even in your thoughts. It's these limits we set to God's power that do the mischief."

Bessington thought of the bare, office-like house

where she lived, of her hard and rather sordid life, of the lack of beauty and freedom in it. It seemed to him little short of a miracle that she should keep this eternal spring of hope and faith alive in her heart so that she in truth set no bounds to the Power she worshipped. What if behind her crude, illogical creed there *did* lurk some truth? What if the limits were indeed of our own setting? He thought of these things when she had gone, while he sat and talked with Madre and Veronica. They thought him a little absentminded and silent. Madre at all events set no limits to her service for others, or in her belief in the rights of others to happiness. She would take no gain to herself at another's cost, and the sum total of result was that she called forth from others corresponding unselfishness, singleness of heart and devotion.

Not from all! There was Stella, of course; the exception!

He wondered if his wire was in time. He still could not but wish it were too late, and then felt ashamed of himself. Madre's wishes were after all of more importance than Stella's discomforture. Still, he knew when he had added a clause to the wire that Stella should come with Mark, that he had a reason at the back of his mind. Madre might have her way as to Adam, but he could not for the life of him see why Stella should not be brought to book and at least made to face the generosity that was spent on her. In all else Madre must have her way and he must support her. He did not seek to find out why it was, but he knew that Mrs. Mears was right, and that with regard to Madre's future the casting vote would lie with him; and he was glad of it.

CHAPTER XIII

"Mark Intervenes"

I

ADAM was away on a staff ride and Stella was left in solitude with the consolation that she could at least please herself by spending more idle days than would meet with Adam's general approval. She lived in the garden, motored each evening, and let her social duties take care of themselves. It was pleasant, but, of course, not so pleasant as having Adam with her. She most genuinely missed him, and the thought that his absence was only for a fortnight at most did not reconcile her to General Meader's inconsiderateness in going staff riding in Wales instead of nearer home.

The garden still looked very beautiful in spite of the dearth of the first best summer flowers. As she strolled down a path Stella almost decided she would ask her mother up for a few days, as Adam had suggested. She had put the proposal aside for the time, thinking that she would prefer solitude, but really her mother would make little difference. She would not want to get up early, and she would be pleased to motor when, and where, Stella liked, and she would enjoy seeing the baby. It would be kind. Adam had hinted as much. Stella felt so content with the world (always excepting General Meader) that she wanted to do some one a kindness. It was still a subtle pleasure to her to display her good possessions to her mother, to make ostentatious use of the best things, and to accept all her little luxuries and joys with an assumed indif-

ference that demonstrated habitual use. In point of fact her consciousness was still keenly alive to her own material gains. These were summed up to her in three parts, good clothes, good food and good surroundings. She had them all and coupled to them she had her husband and child. Certainly she could afford to be kind to her mother.

She began retracing her steps to the house to fulfil this laudable intention before post time, when she saw a tall thin man coming up the entrance drive, and she stopped. It was early for callers, and she was not sure she wanted any. The visitor saw her, hesitated and then, turning from the front door, came straight across the garden towards her.

The heat of the day seemed suddenly to have increased, so that a faint mist swam before her eyes. Of course it couldn't be Mark. She was quite thankful, it couldn't be Mark.

She stood still where she was, watching his approach. It was Mark!

II

"It's so like you to choose a time when Adam isn't at home to protect me," she moaned.

"I didn't know he was away. How could I? Be sensible, Stella!"

"I wonder you expect me to be sensible at all, considering all the horrible things you think of me!" she retorted, picking up a faint show of spirit.

Mark sighed. They had talked for nearly an hour with no results. His first imperious demand, that would have reduced Stella Forrester to tears and compliance, was met by fierce and hot refusals from Stella Preston. The whole thing, she insisted, had nothing to do with Mark, and never had had. She reiterated this now.

"It's a question of your telling Adam or my telling

him, that's all," he said at last driven from all hopes of moving her moral consciousness.

"You are abominably cruel! Here I am perfectly happy, with everything a woman can want, and you want to take it all from me!"

"You exaggerate as hopelessly as ever."

"I don't. I know Adam a great deal better than you do! Oh, Mark!" She suddenly changed her tone, and leaning forward put her hand on his. "Mark, don't be cruel. What does it all matter now? Indeed, you will spoil our lives, Adam's and mine. He would never forgive me. He didn't treat Madre well, you see!"

"I am not thinking of Adam," he persisted.

"But no one seriously thinks it of *her,* or thinks the worse of her. Besides, she's ill—Jane says she can never go about as she used to do, so she could not be seeing people, and it won't make much difference. Do let things alone!"

The case was beyond anger even, and he gazed at her with hopeless despair. There seemed no rudiment of faith or honour in her. She was not in the least ashamed of her appeal. She quite evidently considered it as mere common sense. He made one last try.

"You are building up the whole of your future on a lie, Stella; if you can't see the shame of it, can't you see the danger?"

"You are the only danger."

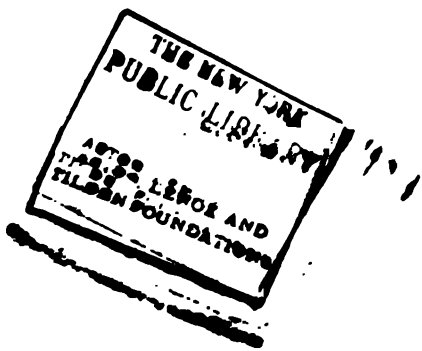
That woke his anger again.

"Because another woman is more generous to you than any living man or woman has a right to expect!"

"Yes, she is generous, I see that. She wouldn't want you to make a fuss about it.

"You think I have come all the way from India to set this right, and am going back without doing it, because Madre is generous and you are without a conscience?"

"SHE STOOD STILL, WATCHING HIS APPROACH"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"You *are* unkind. And you couldn't have come all the way just for that!"

"I did. Are you going to tell Adam, or am I?"

They were back at the starting point. Do what he would he could not chain her to the main issue.

"You care more for a finger ache of your precious Mrs. Crofton than for your own sister's happiness!" she cried bitterly.

"Perhaps I do."

"Mark, don't be such a brute."

"Then it's I?" He got up with a set face.

That forced her hand.

All this time, at the back of her mind, she had been desperately seeking a way out. Holding him off to gain time, thinking little of what she was actually saying, concocting in her mind rather the answer she would have ready for Adam if her brother stuck to his threat, now she seized suddenly on a weapon of defence, and questioned neither its legitimacy nor its power.

"You will not tell him, Mark. I forbid it!" She rose, too, gasping a little. For the first time she showed to him that she was frightened, not of him, but of something or some one else.

"If you do,"—her voice, though it shook, held such despairing resolution that he was compelled to belief—"if you do tell Adam, then I shall take to morphine again and—other things! Adam would never forgive me, and there would be nothing left for me to do. But it would be your doing, your fault, and if it's such an awful thing as you all seem to think, the blame will lie at your door!"

She had found her weapon now and she knew it!

"Stella, you are talking wicked nonsense. You have your child to think of."

She laughed.

"I shouldn't have! Adam would see to that! Re-

member he sent Madre away—his dear Madre! Besides, he really cares more for his son than he does for me. Tell him, if you wish to—I have no more to say."

She moved towards the house: she had the instinct to know that for the time at least the victory was in her hands.

He followed her slowly, being for the moment utterly at a loss. He had no fear himself concerning Adam, but he saw the impossibility of convincing her. For her terror was very real. He made no mistake about that. He had seen genuine fear before, in the eyes of natives, and the recognition of it, here in this quiet garden, momentarily stunned him. Something must have happened, of course, to give rise to so preposterous a fear.

He thought of these things incoherently, as he followed her, uncertain of what to do next, or what she expected of him.

At the door of the house she paused to take a telegram from a boy. Mark waited, watching her. She looked at the address, turned it over, and looked back at him.

"For you," she said, in an odd, constrained voice. "Who knew you were here?"

"No one but Bessington."

He tore open the envelope. It was from Bessington.

"Madre forbids any move until you have seen her. Come to-morrow and bring Mrs. Preston. Bessington."

"Well?"

Stella's question broke in on his thoughts. He answered by putting the wire into her hands.

"I *knew* Madre wouldn't approve!" she said triumphantly. "If only you would listen to her instead of being so sure you were in the right!"

"I am right," he said firmly, "but I'll see her first, *as she* wishes it. We will go early."

"I can't go. I have an engagement."

He met her eyes steadily. This time she knew he was master, and she turned away.

"Very well, if you are going to be horrid again."

They went inside. Stella rang for tea, and asked Mark if he would like to see his nephew.

III

There had been an accident amongst the Welsh mountains, and the general commanding the Staff ride had been badly hurt. Preston was chosen to go to Camberley with certain information, and two days' leave. He slept in town, but wired early next morning to Stella to expect him. The unopened envelope of his wire was the first thing that met his eye when he walked into his own house two days later, wondering where on earth Stella was, and why she was not looking out for him.

He learnt from her maid that Mrs. Preston's brother had arrived three days ago, and that they had both motored up to town that morning, and had started about an hour before he arrived. His telegram had come ten minutes after they had gone.

He felt both puzzled and pleased at Mark's arrival, and a little vexed at missing them, but turned his steps philosophically to the nursery.

The maid still lingered so insistently, that he noticed it, and turned to her with a short "Well?"

"I think they went to see a lady who is ill, sir. Mrs. Preston seemed much upset."

He paused to consider this matter. Was it Mrs. Forrester. He hated questioning the servants, but perhaps he ought to know.

"Do you know who it was?"

"A Mrs. Crofton, I think, sir."

She spoke hesitatingly, hoping she would not be questioned as to how she knew. The fact that her bedroom window had been open when Stella and Mark were standing beneath it talking that morning, accounted for her knowledge. The effect of the name she gave her master caused her intense satisfaction. He stood still, frowning, clearly troubled, even agitated.

"Are you sure?" he demanded.

"I—I think that was the name. I will ask nurse if you like, sir. She might know."

"No, it doesn't matter."

He made as if to go upstairs. After all it was not his business, though it was natural, if Madre were ill, that Mark should wish to see her. Stella probably saw no reason for not going. For after all he had never spoken to her of the quarrel, and had forgotten to wonder at her own silence concerning it.

Perhaps Madre was seriously ill!

He stopped again. Indecision was hateful to him, and he felt irritated. He wandered out and down into the village, to the public telephone, and rang up Veronica. It went against the grain to communicate with the Bessingtons, but it was the quickest way to satisfy himself there was nothing to worry about. It was some time before he got through. When he did, it was Veronica's voice that answered him.

Yes, Madre was not well. She was with them; not in bed, however. They were expecting Mark up that day, and Stella. Madre much wished to see him. Then a little pause:

"Adam, I wish you would come too."

She could not explain why, over the telephone. She could not, indeed, have explained her impulse to ask him at all, but she knew she wanted him there, and that Madre would be pleased.

They were rung off before he had answered one way

or another. He went back to the house still uncertain. Stella had taken the big car; his little runabout was, however, in the garage. It might not be in starting trim. He found himself in the garage looking at it. It seemed quite in order. Ten minutes later he was driving towards London.

IV

"What are you smiling at, Madre?"

"I can't help it when I think of Mark coming all that way! How does he look?"

"Very well and brown. What are you going to say to him?"

"Thank him very much, and explain I would rather he left things alone."

"You won't find it easy to convince him."

"You'll back me up, Dominic?" Her voice was persuasive.

"Why do you say that? Could I hinder you?"

She looked away.

"Yes. I couldn't stand out against you. I suppose I have had rather a bad time lately, and somehow I feel as if I couldn't stand alone any more. It's silly but there it is. I should feel dreadfully worried if it weren't you, but you understand me, so I am safe."

"Well, don't worry. I am not going to stand between you and anything on which you have set your heart."

She sighed with relief.

They were in the drawing room. She steadily refused to be treated as an invalid, and Veronica gave up the attempt, once Dominic had given his approval to Madre's mood. She had said little when her husband told her that Mark and possibly Stella were coming up to see Madre that day, and had only asked if

she were to entertain Stella. Dominic said rather drily that he would relieve her of that task.

Then she rather surprised him.

"I suppose it was Stella all along?"

"How do you know?" he asked.

"You were sure it wasn't Madre; so it must have been Stella. I'm not such a baby as you and Madre think, Dominic."

"I think you are that extreme rarity, a woman who knows how to keep her own counsel," he replied.

"It's no use interfering over things that other people can manage better than one can oneself."

"Is that your creed?"

She looked at him with grave amusement, and a sort of tenderness that he had noticed once or twice and hardly understood.

"Did you think I hadn't any? I must go and see that Madre has her milk."

She went off, and a minute later he heard her voice singing as she went upstairs to the nursery.

Then he had gone into Madre, and with the door open, she heard too and looked at him with rare pleasure.

"Isn't it good to hear her, Dominic? Almost the biggest thing you have done for me, is keeping her so young."

Then they had spoken of Mark and the expected visit.

V

When the Preston's motor stopped at the door, Bessington went out to meet it. Mark looked at him inquiringly, but his manner was as imperturbable as ever. Stella reluctantly prepared to get out. She looked sullen and was silent. She hated coming, hated Mark's silence, his quite obvious contempt for her, and

she hated above all, the fact that Bessington *knew!* Mark had told her that much and she had fiercely upbraided him for giving her away. Although she still held to her point with Mark, that they were all making a great fuss over nothing, she knew that she would find it difficult to hold that opinion in Dominic Bessington's presence, and she resented that.

She was not allowed to get out. Bessington stopped her.

"If Mrs. Preston is not too tired I thought I would take her for a turn round the Heath in my own car," he said, looking at Mark rather than at her. "Madre's really not up to seeing many people, though she would resent being told so. Would you mind, Mrs. Preston?"

He turned to her with a certain deference; but she could no more have said no to him, than she could have told her own chauffeur at that moment to take her straight home.

"I'll just take Mark in, and be back in a minute."

She was left for that minute waiting in her car, wondering why she could not give the order to return, why she couldn't drive away instantly out of the lives of these disturbing people and all concerning them.

Bessington was quite charming and polite when he came out, and packed her comfortably into his own motor.

"The Heath is looking better than one would think," he remarked. "I hope you don't mind. I know Mrs. Crofton will like a long talk with Mark, and would feel she must hurry if she thought you were waiting."

She was utterly bewildered. What did he know, after all, and what did he not know? Was he only playing with her? One thing was certain, that he did not care a rap, despite his politeness, whether she minded coming with him or not. He meant her to come, and she had done so!

They soon turned from the Heath proper, to roads

little frequented, and then Bessington dropped from the mere polite nothings he had let fall from time to time into the matter in hand.

"I dare say that Mark told you Mrs. Crofton was not well," he remarked.

Stella owned he had done so, and hoped it was nothing serious.

He told her in very plain and direct words, what was wrong, and of the doctor's warning and estimate of Madre's future, and her own brave fight against what seemed inevitable.

"She won't like doing nothing," Stella said, with a little shiver. Her imagination could at least grip essential facts.

"No, she will not. She will want all the help her friends can give her. Mrs. Preston, I have something I ought to tell you. Sometime ago I learnt the truth about Madre and you. It was an interesting, curious affair, but I learnt it without her permission, so of course I have kept it to myself."

She leant back in her seat, shaking a little and trying not to be frightened. She saw at once what it meant, or might mean. Madre might get her way with Mark, but there would be still some one else to reckon with, and that, Madre's son-in-law! Would she never be free? She never questioned his statement. Even her imagination refused to conjure up details which should give the lie to his plain words.

"Of course she took the only possible course she could take at the time," he went on, without glancing at her. "Quite the right course. She would have taken it even if she had known she would have to pay as she has."

"The Merediths and the rest of them were brutes!" burst forth Stella.

"Quite so. Did you tell them?" He turned his head sharply to catch her off her guard.

"No, I didn't."

"Whom did you tell?" he insisted quietly.

"I can't see what it has to do with you. It's all between Madre, Mark and myself."

"I am glad to hear you say that—if you and Mark are of one mind, as I feel sure you are. Still, it does matter to me a good deal. I am her son-in-law, after all."

It was her turn to flash a look at him, and she caught at the chance of hurting him.

"You ought to have married her yourself!"

"We were discussing to whom it was you told the story of Mrs. Crofton taking drugs."

She began to get really frightened, since she could not make him angry.

"I never told any one that. I think I told Jane Mitchen that Adam *thought* she did, because Jane kept bothering as to why Madre did not come to see me. I *had* to say some thing! I told her it was stupid of Adam—but I don't remember very well. It was the night my baby was born."

His face softened perceptibly. They were on a lonely piece of road now, and he slackened down the car to a mere crawl.

"Yes, that accounts for it. I had fancied Adam told."

"You used to be a fair judge of character!" She tossed it out scornfully.

"Yes, again. Anger destroys one's judgment. And Adam, not knowing that you knew, believed that Madre must have given herself away, and that made him even surer. Yes, that's quite clear. Now just what was the bargain between you and her?"

She would not answer. She made a feeble attempt to tell herself he had neither right nor power to question her.

"It was probably quite a reasonable bargain," he said encouragingly.

It seemed no use denying him when he was so sure she would answer in the end!

"The bargain, as you call it, was that she should tell Adam nothing until I gave her leave."

She said it defiantly, and the little soft spot in Bessington's heart hardened again.

"On the understanding that you would give that, as soon as you were really well?"

She hated the blandness of his voice, as she hated the force of his personality. She would far rather have faced Mark's hot scorn and fierce insistence.

"It must have been very trying for you, knowing you were not well enough to meet your obligation, and that meanwhile people were going on misunderstanding her," he remarked sympathetically.

"She never sent or reminded me," said Stella sullenly.

He lifted his brows as he bent down to readjust something.

"It's not a very easy situation for you, Mrs. Preston. I don't wonder you feel worried. I have been trying to see what is really the simplest and easiest way out for you."

"There's no need," she exclaimed sharply, clinging to her last refuge. "Madre doesn't want anything done. You wired as much yourself."

"No, but of course that's too hard on *you*. You couldn't accept it. You must remember that what ties her hand is not knowing whether you are really well or ill. Naturally she doesn't want Mark to give things away till you say so. It would look as if she hadn't kept her promise."

"I don't know what you mean. You are playing *with* me!" she broke out fiercely. "I tell you there's

no need to do anything. Why can't you all let Madre do as she wants?"

"At the cost of your self-respect?"

He said it quite gently, but with a curious suavity that chilled her.

"Of course if Mrs. Crofton were really free and still chose to keep her own counsel neither you nor I nor any one would have the slightest right to say no to her. You would have to accept her generosity in the spirit in which it's offered."

Again she was oppressed by a sense of bewilderment, and of some hidden depths within her that answered to his call and would not be silenced.

"Otherwise it would be an intolerable position for you," he went on evenly. "Adam might still get to know by a hundred chances, and you would have nothing to show as a set off. It would look as if it were entirely your fault."

She made a grudging concession to that hidden self that would not be suffocated.

"You think she won't tell him even if I give her permission?"

"I can't possibly say."

Bessington spoke indifferently. He was not going to give her that assurance. Let her reap a grain of credit from the position if she could, or she would be utterly bankrupt.

They drove on more quickly. Stella sat quiet, incapable of speech, trying to get abreast of this man's meaning and to stave off her inevitable surrender. It was inevitable, she knew. Indeed it seemed to her that he had after all only revealed to her her own purpose. Mark had fought to bend her to his ends, but Bessington had deluded her into believing his ends were of her own choosing!

Presently they had turned homewards and were climbing a steep hill. He spoke again.

"The worst of people like Mrs. Crofton is, that they insist on living on mountain tops, and some of us find the air rather rarefied. Still, there are compensations. How's your baby?"

She struggled through another fog of mystification and emerged to find herself talking freely of her son.

They turned the corner, and she saw that they were back again, and that though her own car had gone into the garage, there was a little Humber car at the door.

"It's Adam's," she gasped, and her face went white. He gave a swift look.

Yes, it was fright! He slackened down speed.

"That's all right, if rather mystifying," he said cheerfully. "I was going to suggest that you asked Adam to be friends with Mrs. Crofton again."

As they entered the hall the maid told them that Mrs. Bessington was in the garden with Mr. Preston, and would they join them there.

Bessington, instead of complying, opened the door of his own sitting room.

"Come in, Mrs. Preston. You need not be anxious. If anything were wrong they would have been on the lookout for us."

She followed him mechanically.

Bessington knew now that he had her completely in his power. He could find it in his heart to be sorry for her even, but he had not the slightest intention of letting her off.

He put pen and paper before her.

"If you will just let Madre have it in writing."

"Have what?"

"Your permission to act as she likes."

"But not now—when Adam's here!" she cried with whitening lips.

"My dear Mrs. Preston, what difference does that *make?* Suppose she does see that it's best to be quite

frank about it all? What better opportunity could there be than when we are all here to explain it to him, and how it was you had to wait so long till you were quite fit? Mark's being here makes it all the more simple, explicable. It would be simple now—supposing she saw it like that. It would never be so simple again, remember."

At last she met his eyes. They were kindly, but there was no wavering in them. At least she read no scorn there, nor contempt, but instead a great pity. Yet never by a single word did he assert his right to pity or blame. He just took it for granted that her wish to act was in accordance with some law of being that governed them both, and she could not gainsay it.

"What am I to write?" she asked in a choking voice.

"Just what ever comes first to your mind."

She wrote this:

"Dear Madre: You can do what you like about telling Adam. Stella."

She handed it to him, and he put it in an envelope without looking at it, and sealed it; then he handed it back to her, but she pushed it away.

"No, no, don't give it me!"

He saw she was on the verge of tears, which was the last thing he wanted, and fetched her some water. Under his firm ministrations she made a most unusual effort to control herself.

"We'll go into the garden and find your husband, and then I'll take your note to Mrs. Crofton. Remember I don't know what she'll do, but until we know you must play up and not let Adam think there's anything amiss. I am sure you are good at that."

He said it quizzically, but she had the grace to blush.

They went down and out into the little garden, where Adam was walking up and down with Veronica.

The latter looked a little anxiously at her husband. It was possible he would be anything but pleased to see Adam, and she was responsible for his being there, but Bessington gave no sign he was otherwise than pleased. Adam explained his presence—told Stella that she looked tired and that Mark had had no right to drag her up to town this weather.

"Or I to take her further still, I expect you think," said Bessington. "It was nice and fresh on the Heath though. Was it too much for you, Mrs. Preston?"

Stella said No; she was not tired.

"I think it was worth it myself. I'll just go now and rout Mark out."

He gave Stella a little reassuring glance as he went.

If it were not for Madre he could almost have found the situation amusing.

CHAPTER XIV

"Show me the man who will shirk no responsibility, who will judge me by my virtues as well as by my faults, who will ever expect me to act up to the highest that is within me, and I will make of him a friend that shall last till I need friendship no more."

I

"MARK, what am I to say to you? How does one thank a man for travelling six thousand miles to do one a service?" said Felicity.

"I've not done it yet," he returned quickly. "I should have done, but for your wire, and the fact that Adam was away."

"The gods are on my side!"

"You don't imagine I am going to do—nothing, after all?"

She patted the chair beside her.

"Come and sit down, Mark. I can't talk when you are wandering about."

"There's nothing to talk about—on that subject."

"There is. I don't want you to do anything, Mark, please."

He resisted this with all his mental strength, in silence, but she felt the force of his opposition.

"It's quite simple if you think of it. I don't mind owning that at first I cared a great deal. Even if no one else had known I should still have cared that I couldn't explain things to Adam."

"Madre, it won't bear thinking about!"

"I assure you it will, if you are patient. Well, I have got over all that. People are really quite nice, and the only thing that would really be unbearable, would be to feel that I had had a bad time for nothing. It would seem to me unendurable and cruel if no one in the end is to reap any advantage from it. One doesn't mind being a little unhappy if there is gain somewhere to some one, but unproductive pain frightens me. You are not going to make it unproductive?"

"Who gains anything but Stella?"

She looked down a little apologetically.

"I fear I am really not thinking of Stella, but of Adam. I do want him to be happy."

"His happiness can't be worth much if it's built up on a lie!"

"But it's worth something! And what it's worth has to be saved for him. They are very happy together, you know, Mark."

"Stella doesn't deserve it!"

"We have nothing to do with what Stella deserves or not. At least I haven't; but I have got something to do with saving Adam's happiness. He isn't the kind of man who would ever find things the same if he were told this now. I never saw that at the time; it was stupid of me. I can't endure that he should have his outlook spoilt in life, because I was stupid! Mark, it's a dreadful thing to damage those we love, however good our intentions may have been." Her voice was urgent, and quick with pain.

"I can't see how you, who are so straightforward, can put up with his not knowing."

She looked very grave.

"It is not every one in the world who can stand up against a truth, and keep their sense of proportion. *Adam* couldn't! Many people can't, and if we fail to

keep that proportion in mind, then it's not the truth we get, after all, but a distorted version of it, and that's every bit as bad to live with, as a lie. Besides, what is it, that you call a lie? The fact that Adam believes something of me, that's not true, or that he believes Stella to be a stronger woman than she is? If it's the first, then by now he does not think very much about it. If he regrets his old idea of me a little, that's better than that he should forget the idea he has now of his wife. Perhaps it's not a correct one, but it's a good one. It errs on the right side. You know, or you ought to know, that when we live with people, it matters enormously what we think about them. Because they will grow like it, more or less, sooner, or later. Adam's idea of Stella is a nice one, and I am quite sure she has it in her to develop along that line; but if you insist on telling him this, he will lose that idea, and she'll suffer."

Mark moved uneasily. He was thinking of Stella's threat, and he knew that, against his will, he was succumbing to Madre's wishes.

"Suppose she were willing—wished to tell Adam?" he suggested. It was hardly a hope. He knew Stella would clutch at Madre's wish.

"That would be different, so long as she were not forced to it. If she felt so sure of Adam, that she was willing—" she broke off. To her, too, that was a desirable issue, but a vain one.

Mark shifted his ground.

"You forbid me to move?"

"There are only very few people in the world that we have the right to forbid or order. I want you to do nothing because you see it as I do."

He got up, and again moved about the room in his restless way. She watched him with pleasure; loving his thin figure and brownness, and the air of self-containedness he conveyed.

"If only I had known, I would have written straight to Adam," he groaned.

"And who would have built up their shattered happiness then?"

"Why don't you and Stella trust Adam?"

She looked away. It was not a demand she wanted to face. It was one thing to recognise the flaws in Adam, another to acknowledge them to Mark.

"There are some sorts of things he would never understand. In the first place it would have been comparatively easy, if Stella had been able to see it. I had to choose for him, and I chose to give his son the best start. Now it is much more complicated to explain."

He still fought for his way, but more feebly, and presently he had only one arrow left to his bow.

"I got leave to come, you know, because I told Lord Lugan the real reason.

"Wilfred Lugan! And he let you come for that?" Her eyes shone faintly.

"He won't be best pleased that I've wasted the time for nothing."

"I'll write to him. Dear Mark, I know I must seem most horribly ungrateful."

Her eyes filled with tears, and he was conscience stricken. Madre of old was not given to tears.

"Don't worry, Madre," he said hastily; "it shall be as you like. You have done too much for me to ever stand against you!"

"I've done nothing for you."

"You gave me a standard. It's a useful thing for a man to have."

He did not look at her. He looked instead at an African bowl, took it up, examined it, and set it down.

"I got a nice bit of old Cashmere work lately. I *meant* to bring it, but forgot to pack it. I'll send it

when I get back. By the way, Lord Lugan sent all sorts of messages to you."

"Quite sure he did?"

Mark knitted his brow.

"Well, he began to, anyhow."

"And then stopped! Yes! Will you tell him I am very glad you've got so good a chief, and he so good a secretary?"

"I'll tell him verbatim!"

He began talking of India. Here was obvious effort, but she soothed it out. When Bessington entered they were talking naturally of any subject under the sun but the one that had brought him six thousand miles.

Bessington carried a note in his hand.

"Tired, Madre?" He looked at her critically, but she shook her head.

"I've been taking Mrs. Preston for a drive," he went on, with a quick glance at Mark, "and she's sent you this note, in case you didn't feel up to seeing her. I felt I ought to explain to her that I had found out about how things were between you and her, without your telling me—or Mark!"

His tone was a little apologetic.

Madre was opening the note with shaking fingers. The two men faced each other.

"Madre has been trying to convince me it's my duty to hold my tongue over this miserable business."

"Yes, I know that's her view."

"You don't agree?" he asked sharply.

Bessington was silent. He was watching Madre, who had read the note and was looking at him with a wonderful look on her face.

They were all three silent a moment.

"Stella sets me free to act as I will," she said softly.

Mark gazed blankly at Bessington.

"How did you do it?"

"Every one will answer some call or other. I was lucky enough to hit on the right one, that's all."

Mark turned eagerly to Madre.

"This alters matters."

"Yes, indeed it does. You see how we misjudged her! I am so thankful, Mark!"

"But you will be reasonable now?" he urged.

"I feel more than ever that's what I have been all along."

Mark turned to Bessington as a last hope, but he shook his head.

"Adam's turned up," he said slowly; "apparently something went wrong on the Staff ride and when he got back and found you both had gone, and that Madre was ill, he came up to enquire. He's out in the garden with Stella and Veronica."

Mark strode up to the window and looked out. It was certainly Adam walking up and down and puffing blight off Veronica's roses. All his old affection for him struggled to the surface, fighting against his sterner judgment.

Felicity leant forward with beseeching eyes.

"Dominic, do you think he would mind coming up to see me just for a minute? I should so love to see him again!"

"He shall come."

Mark turned quickly and went out of the room to fetch him.

Felicity still held the note in her hand.

"How did you do it, Dominic?"

"Took it for granted that that was what she meant doing all along."

She tore the note in little fragments and put it in the envelope.

"I might have saved my labour," he groaned; "what a waste!"

"No, it's no waste. You know that! It was splendid of you."

"You'd have gone on fretting else," he grumbled, "and I had a faint hope you would use it. I trust you know you have destroyed her only defence if Adam ever gets to hear."

"Oh, Dominic, I never thought of that!"

"You can keep the bits anyhow, or give them to her. And perhaps our word would go for something."

He stood up.

"You haven't the slightest right to see all these people to-day, but I suppose you must have your way, as usual."

Their footsteps were in the hall. He looked at her anxiously. Her eyes were too bright, and her hands shaking a little, but he could see it would not do to disappoint her.

Then they entered—Mark followed by Adam, and Stella with Veronica. Stella's eyes flew to Bessington as to some refuge. She was clearly afraid of what was coming, and he crossed over to her to whisper a word of reassurance. Adam went straight up to Madre. It was a difficult situation for him, and he faced it with his usual directness.

"Veronica tells me you have been seedy, Madre. I'm most awfully sorry, but what on earth made you go and live in the city? Have you turned financier?"

He was most kind and anxious to set her at ease, and blot out from her mind that last meeting of theirs. The two men, listening, felt first helpless anger, and then a gleam of humour in the situation became apparent, at least to Bessington. Mark saw only that reflected in his face.

"Camberley agrees with you, Adam. What was this accident that brought you back? No, don't tell me yet. I haven't seen Stella."

She leant forward and held out her hands. Mark turned away.

For the fraction of a second Stella hesitated.

"Dominic gave me your note. It was nice of you to remember about it—but I really don't want it now. I'll keep it for a remembrance."

Stella took her hand, but found nothing to say. Her whole attention was riveted on the need of not betraying herself. Adam intervened.

"Stella still doesn't believe in the General's accident, and thinks it is something to do with baby that brought me back. Her mind's at Camberley, and we must go back and find it."

Felicity was conscious of a sudden throbbing in her ears, and a sense of confusion and disappointment. She looked appealingly at Dominic and heard herself saying, in an odd voice hardly like her own:

"But I've hardly seen you at all, Adam!"

Bessington came between her and the others, and said something that she did not catch, but they all seemed to melt away, and only Veronica and Adam were left, and the latter was saying:

"Just five minutes, Adam, so that she will feel she has seen you."

Then she too was gone.

They were alone, and Adam half resented it, and half accepted it as the shortest way out to set matters on a better footing. He was in truth shocked at the change in her since their last meeting, and it was none of his business to think to what it might be due. He had been too hasty and inconsiderate in the past. He saw that, in a flash, now, though all these months it had not occurred to him.

"Madre, I expect I said a great deal more than I had any business to say the last time we met. You must be kind, and remember I was a much harassed

man. You'll be your old generous self and make allowance, won't you?"

"There's no need, my dear, I quite understand."

"I think there is need. It wasn't my business to say anything that I did; and there's another thing I want to tell you badly. That is, that I never told any one about it, not even Stella. On my word of honour, Madre!"

He was genuinely troubled and greatly in earnest. The suspicion that she thought as Bessington had done, hurt him most cruelly.

"Oh, I knew that, Adam!"

"I had to tell Fafner, because he came to see me; but he did not learn it from me."

"It's ancient history, my dear. I know just how the story got about. Don't worry. It doesn't matter. How's your son? Tell me about him."

After all he was glad to have had the matter out, as he thought. He had been annoyed at first at Mark dragging Stella up here, but it turned out just right. There was now no need to go on being on bad terms with Madre, and he would much sooner be friends. There was no doubt in his mind now that Madre had taken the stuff because she was ill. She might even have been ordered it. She hated being thought ill, and wouldn't own to it. That was the reasonable answer to it all. Having found it, he could dismiss it from his mind.

"You ought to go abroad again, Madre. It would pull you up. Remember how much better you were after that Corsican trip?"

Yes, she remembered.

When the others came back they were discussing travelling possibilities.

"I'm telling Madre she ought to think of that Black Sea trip she used to talk about," he said to Veronica.

"It would do her no end of good to be planning something."

Bessington looked at her thoughtfully.

"What ever you may do about travelling to-morrow, you are going to rest now," he said decidedly. "Come along, you good people. Madre has had visitors enough."

He walked down the path to the road with Adam, where his little car was waiting. Stella, who was to go back with her husband, was speaking to Mark.

"What's the matter with Madre exactly?" demanded Adam abruptly.

"Her heart has gone wrong. The doctor says she must have had a big physical strain some few years ago. She can't apparently remember anything about it."

He looked rather fixedly at Adam, who, though he looked perplexed, offered no enlightenment, but summoned Stella, tucked her in and said good-bye to Mark.

For a long time Adam drove silently, and Stella was thankful. She wanted time to get command of her own faculties, foreseeing possible pitfalls before her. There were also Mark's last words to her to consider: "It will be all right so long as you run straight, Stella. That's all I have to say."

She felt that it was too much to say, and was irritated with him, and glad that he had not accepted Adam's invitation to put in his time with them. He must go to Pieceminster first, he had said.

"I wonder what really made Madre bad to begin with," remarked Adam at last. "The doctor says some bad strain, but doctors are such idiots sometimes. When we were at Bath—at Fafner's, I remember, Madre and I went for an excursion up Monkton Farley one day, and a big stone slipped, or nearly slipped, and she kept it from sliding down on to me, because

I was in its way. It would probably have smashed me if she hadn't. I don't suppose, though, it could have been that."

"She'd remember if it were," Stella answered quickly. She did not want Adam to dwell on the subject of Madre.

"I suppose she would. It would be beastly if it were all because she had done something for me. We've made up our disagreement, Stella. I never told you what it was about, and I'm not going to now. You never asked."

"Other people told me. It doesn't matter now, Adam."

"No. She says she knows how the story got about. At least I never told that."

Stella wriggled impatiently. It was very distasteful. She began to feel sorry for herself. She was secure, but she had after all to pay some sort of price for her security. However, on the whole she was glad that Adam had made friends with Madre again. It would be easier all round. The most curious thing was, she held no malice against Dominic Bessington.

II

They were alone again, and for a brief minute Bessington was alive to a great stillness and peace in the room, that cut like the sharp edge of a knife between them and the outside world with its multiple of interests and conflicting aims.

It was only momentarily as Time counts with mortals—Time, who is jealous, catches his prisoners back sharply into his narrow limits, and these swift glances into the regions of true values must cramp themselves into those limits, or fail our perceptions altogether.

"Dominic!"

It was Felicity herself who pointed the limit.

"Dominic, that was really an inspiration of Adam's. Do find me the guide books I left with you."

He obeyed her mechanically. Veronica, who was sitting by the window, looked up as if she would speak, and then refrained. There was no use in protesting. Madre and Dominic would settle things, and they must know better than she did. Should she, or should she not, put Christopher on to more substantial food? She gave the problem her whole attention. It was an important matter and it was for her decision alone.

Dominic found the books and brought them in. Madre sat up quickly, with a little flush of colour in her face. She turned the leaves over quickly to one heavily scored page. There were some loose sheets of paper in it, covered with writing.

"I worked it all out years ago. I always meant to go there."

"Where?" he asked.

"To Trebizond and Turkey in Asia. Dominic, couldn't you take a real holiday and come too?"

"I thought it was too adventuresome a journey for Veronica," he answered, his thoughts leaping back to some dim recollection of idle words spoken on this same subject years ago.

"But you would be with her to be responsible! Veronica dear, you would like it, wouldn't you?"

"Like what, Madre?"

"To go to the Black Sea. The trip we used to talk about?"

"There's Christopher."

"Wouldn't he be all right with the Masters?"

Veronica looked doubtful.

"Why shouldn't Dominic and you go by yourselves?"

"I am not going without you, Veronica," said Dominic quietly.

"But you will come!" Madre's voice was eager. "Oh, Dominic, you don't know how I have longed to make that trip. It's all new. We can really do it quite comfortably, for I've spent nothing the last year. There's a strange, beautiful country hidden away there that hardly any one knows. I've read of it, and I met some one who had lived out there, and it fired me to hear of it. Think of the evenings there on the fringe of things—the stars and the desert. Think of the quiet of the tents, the little lights of a camp, and the strange wonder of a land that has been!"

The vision of it was with her in her eyes, so that though she was looking at Dominic, she hardly saw him. The call had sounded for her at last, and she responded with every fibre of her being.

"We can send to Ruman to-morrow. Don't you know him? He lives in Fleet Street, and he knows all there is to know about eastern travel. He'll get us the right men and tell us what's wanted. I want to go by the old caravan route. It's still the trade way, you know; I have all the notes."

Her eyes were shining with excitement, and her eagerness was infectious; but Dominic still held his peace. Veronica came and leant over the table by her mother. She too had been momentarily carried back into the interest of other days.

"It's all that Mr. Cleaver's doings. I wonder if he is still at Baiburt. Do you remember how we liked his wife?"

They fell to talking of recollections that meant nothing to Bessington. He pushed back his chair and watched them. He, too, was thinking. In his ear there were two voices:—

"A perfectly quiet life in the country, doing nothing."

"Don't let her think herself an invalid. Let her do what she sets her heart on doing."

Which was he to follow?

Common sense, which said, "Here's a woman with a strained heart, who, the doctors say, should do nothing for the rest of her life, and who only really lives when she is doing things, moving, seeing and enjoying life, as only she can enjoy it. Is she to enjoy it to the end, when ever that end may be, or spend her time warding off that end in dull stagnation?"

He thought of his father and that weary life on the veldt. What gain had he found in his spun-out years? Was life itself, cut off from its natural atmosphere, worth living? His heart thrilled to see Madre again full of eager interest, her energy flashing out, if only for a time.

Why shouldn't it last?

"Don't set limits in your thoughts to God's power." Anyhow, his word should not quench this new found energy.

The two voices sunk into the background; what remained uppermost in his mind was the knowledge that he understood her too completely, shared with her too exact a sympathy of soul, to stand between her and her desire.

Veronica must go too, of course.

She would hate leaving the child. He did not like that himself, but Christopher would be safe. Surely they could make some sacrifice for one they loved, who was always ready to sacrifice herself for others.

In his heart he knew that for him it was no sacrifice, for he too was eager for the star lit nights, the clean cold air of the desert and the outposts of civilisation—eager to watch her drinking it in, and to be with her there.

Veronica's voice broke in on him.

"I don't think you know, Madre, that Dr. Clifford will like it."

Felicity looked up at him quickly. The moment of decision was on him. She would abide by it, he knew, and he knew it was not in him to quench the eagerness of her spirit.

"Dominic, you understand better than doctors. You won't be unkind, will you?"

He looked into her eyes, that smiled at him, and he saw she understood all that was involved, and had weighed the case for herself. He saw the courage and fire of her inextinguished youth flickering to life again, and he smiled back:

"All right, Madre. We'll go!"

END

(3)